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All "Bi" Ourselves?

Bisexual representation in contemporary YA literature and its prevalence the past two decades

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education
Supervisor: Hanna Musiol

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Abstract

This thesis explores and analyzes how bisexuality has been presented in YA literature in the 21st century, and how it has evolved from being almost non-existent in YA literature to being more incorporated. By giving a close-reading analysis of two YA novels (*Empress of the World* by Sara Ryan and *Imogen, Obviously* by Becky Albertalli), this thesis will compare and contrast how bisexual representation has evolved through the 21st century. It will then discuss how queer YA literature has evolved in general, with a focus on bisexual YA literature, and discuss why it is important that queer YA literature should stay in the hands of young adults. The thesis concludes that although there is still a long way left to go in terms of bisexual representation, it is still nevertheless going forward, and that queer YA literature is important to keep in the hands of young adults.

Keywords: queer, bisexual, young adult literature, LGBTQ+ literature

Sammendrag

Denne masteravhandlingen utforsker og analyserer hvordan biseksualitet har blitt presentert i ungdomslitteratur i det 21. århundre, og hvordan den har utviklet seg fra å være nesten ikke-eksisterende i ungdomslitteraturen til å inkludere det mer. Gjennom en litterær analyse av to ungdomsbøker (*Empress of the World* av Sara Ryan, og *Imogen, Obviously* av Becky Albertalli), vil denne avhandlingen sammenligne for å finne forskjeller og likheter av hvordan biseksuell representasjon har utviklet seg gjennom det 21. århundre. Den vil deretter diskutere hvordan skeiv ungdomslitteratur har utviklet seg generelt, med et fokus på biseksuell ungdomslitteratur, og diskutere hvorfor det er viktig at skeiv ungdomslitteratur skal forbli i hendene på ungdommer. Avhandlingen konkluderer med at selv om det fortsatt er et stykke igjen når det gjelder biseksuell representasjon, går det likevel fremover, og at skeiv ungdomslitteratur er viktig å beholde i hendene til ungdom.

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Introduction

The young adult genre has in the past couple decades become a much larger genre than what it started out as, and has throughout the years become a much more inclusive genre than what it once was, especially in terms of LGBTQ+¹ themed YA novels. Queer YA literature published in the 1970s and 1980s often included negative experiences suffered by fictional LGBTQ+ teens (Jenkins and Cart 103) and reflected in a way that queer (mostly gay) lives were not happy lives (Jenkins and Cart 104). There has however, been an increase in LGBTQ+ literature featuring gay assimilation (GA) and queer consciousness/communities (QC) rather than homosexual visibility (HV) as defined by Jenkins and Cart². Generally speaking, the YA LGBTQ+ literature published have oftentimes mostly emphasized the lives of gay or lesbian characters, and not so much any of the other numerous identities incorporated under the LGBTQ+ umbrella term. Luckily, in the past decades since the start of the 21st century, many more YA LGBTQ+ themed novels include more and more GA and QC rather than just HV (Jenkins and Cart 117). The incorporation of other and more queer identities in the same novels is an important aspect as it will create a better representation of these queer identities.

This thesis is mainly concerned with bisexual representation, and the general consensus seems to be that although bisexuality has, in the past decades, gotten more verification and presence in literature and society, bisexual representation still has a long way to go. As Heyfield et al. points out “most research on non-heterosexual visual identities has focused on lesbian women” (173), meaning that, as well as other non-heterosexual visual identities, bisexuality has not gotten much attention in research either. Epstein too concludes on this, saying that “bisexuality is unfortunately still missing” (111), and lacks the same representation that other non-heterosexual identities have started to get more of. Bisexuality is then as a result seen as less acceptable than being heterosexual, and even homosexual, and is “beyond normal” (Epstein 111). What exists of bisexual representation in literature for younger readers, both in

¹ I use the acronym LGBTQ+ to refer to the numerous non-normative/queer identities found within the queer/LGBTQ+ community. I recognize that the term “queer” can be controversial and that some who do not identify as straight/cis-gendered also do not identify as queer. Nevertheless, for the sake of this paper, LGBTQ+ and queer will be used interchangeably, where they will represent identities that are not straight and/or cis-gendered.

² Where HV refers to a story in which someone who becomes outed throughout the story, either voluntarily or involuntarily, GA refers to stories where someone just so happens to be queer just as someone else just so happens to be straight (Jenkins and Cart xiv). QC takes this a step further and includes an aspect of queer community within the novels, where the queer characters are not the “token queer” of the novel.

children's books as well as young adult books, is often a negative stereotype, and is often described in negative terms (Epstein 111).

Central to this thesis is sexuality and gender identities, most notably the bisexual identity. However, it is important to note that these sexual and gender identities are not rigid, but rather fluid. Queer theorists recognize that these sexual and gender identities are social and multiple, and not the least fluid (Blackburn et al. 14). The word “queer” itself means something out of the ordinary, and when we then talk about queer identities, we refer to identities not performing to “the normal” (“normal” being straight and cisgendered). “Queer” serves as a way to name these “out of the ordinary” identities and practices that complicate or fail to fit the normative and stable formulation of what is “normal” (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan 849). By viewing sexual identity as a fluid concept, queer theorists “interrogate and disrupt notions of normal” (Blackburn et al. 14), most notably in regard to gender and sexuality, but is not limited to only gender and sexuality. A person is then not their sexuality or gender, but rather “experiences emotional and sexual desires, engages in sexual acts, and performs gender, but these cannot be captured with a single, stable sexual or gender identity” (Blackburn et al. 15). This in turn then means that a single person can experience different emotional and sexual desires, resulting in identifying with different sexualities, or performing different genders depending on different circumstances. These sexual and gender identities may be conflicting at times, but it is multiple and fluid, and can change over time. As Blackburn et al. points out “there is a post structural conception of sexual and gender identities” (29), meaning that many of the sexualities and genders have been labeled after they have been performed, which further opens up discussions and an interpretive space for different ideologies regarding these sexual and gender identities. It is often the relationship between identity categories considered “normal” (heterosexual and cisgendered) and identity categories considering “other” (LGBTQ+ identities) that is once again emphasized within queer theory (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan 848).

Queer literature then, also encompasses these notions of disruptive sexual and gender norms (such as not being heterosexual, white, able-bodied, and cis-gendered). Whether it consists of characters performing a different gender, having a fluid sexuality, or in general disrupting other norms, queer literature emphasizes the notion of this differentness. Much of queer literature nowadays encompasses the more modern definition of queer; an umbrella term for all those identifying as something other than heterosexual and/or cisgender (Killermann 26). Not everyone that identifies as something other than heterosexual and/or cisgender will

also identify as queer, but as Killermann states; as long as 51% of people who identify with the definition for their label agree with said definition, it is good enough (23). Definitions are not absolute and may be subject to change after periods of time, and some may not want to put a label on themselves at all.

As with any sexual identity, bisexuality can be a term hard to define. As we have established however, any definition is subject to change, and no definition will ever be absolute. Oftentimes, bisexuality is a term used to define a person's sexuality as attracted to both men and women. However, “most bisexual researchers and activists define bisexuality as attraction to multiple genders” (Shaw 2), and thus invokes the discussion of what a gender is. This paper will not discuss what a gender is and how many there are of them, but will go by the general consensus that gender is not something one has, but rather something one enacts (Wickens 150)³. When discussing bisexuality, the bi in bisexual attraction does not necessarily mean a 50/50 split between attraction to men and attraction to women, but rather attraction towards “*same* and *other*” (Shaw 7), referring to the same gender one identifies with and the other genders one does not identify oneself with. It is also important to note that this does not mean that someone identifying as bisexual will at all times be attracted to anyone with any gender to the same degree, but rather they have as Ochs said “the potential to be attracted, romantically and/or sexually, to people of more than one [gender], not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree” (qtd. in Shaw 22). Bisexuality continues to “fall into the gap between the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality” (Pallotta-Chiarolli 8), creating a distance even from other central LGBTQ+ sexualities.

As Kneen uses the term “gender plural desires” (363) to give a definition towards bisexuality, it can as Spencer argue “serve as an alternative towards YA characters who do not identify as any specific sexuality” (2). Despite bisexuality being greater than or comparable to the incidence of homosexuality (Yoshino 353), bisexual visibility is still a minority compared to that of gay and/or lesbian visibility. This gap of bisexual representation in literature is often referred to as “bisexual invisibility” (Kneen 361). Most of bisexual representation found within literature often occurs by having a bisexual protagonist, whereas other gay or lesbian representation can occur with having either the protagonist or other secondary characters

³ That there is a difference towards anatomical sex and cultural gender is an important point in gender discussion, and this paper will refer to gender as a social construct the way Wickens defines it as something one enacts, and which one can enact differently in different contexts (150)

portrayed as gay or lesbian. It is not only a disproportionate representation that is the cause of this “bisexual invisibility”, but it is also about the way in which bisexuality is being portrayed that enhances this invisibility. Typical negative stereotypes include bisexuals being “hypersexual, undecided, ‘in the closet’, unfaithful, promiscuous, and attention-seeking (Kneen 361). Continuous representation through negative stereotypes such as these contributes to the system of bi-erasure, and without actively challenging such stereotypes, bisexual teenagers will stay as Kneen argues “in the margins, invisible” (376).

This thesis focuses on bisexual representation in YA literature, and, specifically, how two YA novels; *Empress of the World* by Sara Ryan (2001) and *Imogen, Obviously* by Becky Albertalli (2023), published 22 years apart, depict and represent bisexuality in a positive light through their character development of their protagonists and supporting characters. Through close reading and analyzing different parts of the novels, this thesis seeks to explore the differences and the evolution of bisexual representation in YA literature. Before choosing these two novels for my analysis, I had some criteria that had to be fulfilled. Firstly, I wanted the main bisexual representation to be in the form of the protagonist, and have at least one other mentioned queer person. The novels would also need to be written at different times, the first one as close to the year 2000 as possible, and the other as close to the year 2024 as possible. The novels would also have to be categorized as contemporary YA, preferably with characters aged 12-20. With these criteria in mind, *Empress of the World* (2001) and *Imogen, Obviously* (2023) were the two novels chosen.

The first chapter will start with a literary analysis of *Empress of the World* and discuss how it disrupts sexual and gender norms, and represents different queer identities. It will then continue with a literary analysis of *Imogen, Obviously* and again discuss how it too disrupts sexual and gender norms, and represents different queer identities. It will also compare and contrast the two novels, and look at the difference in how they disrupt sexual and gender norms, and represent different queer identities, and look at the implications these two novels have for each other. The second chapter will take a closer look at queer YA literature in general, with a focus on bisexual YA literature, and how it has evolved in terms of queer representation throughout the 21st century. It will also look at the implications if queer YA literature were to be removed from the hands of young adults, and why it is so important that they are being kept in libraries and schools. This thesis will conclude that although there still is a long way to go in terms of bisexual (and in general queer) representation in YA literature, we have come a far way, and that it should keep moving in the direction it is going.

Chapter 1: On stand”bi”; bisexuality in contemporary YA literature

This chapter will focus on a literary analysis of *Empress of the World* and of *Imogen, Obviously*. It will look at how sexuality and gender is being challenged and disrupted differently in the two novels, and how bisexuality is being represented in the two novels. The analyses will mostly focus on the character relationships the protagonist of each novel creates, and how bisexuality as a sexuality is being viewed differently in the two novels. As *Empress of the World* is written as GA literature, *Imogen, Obviously* is written as QC literature, which will be evident through the literary analyses that follows.

Empress of the world, and of Nicola’s heart

Empress of the World tells the story of 15-year-old Nicola Lancaster, who spends her summer at a summer camp for gifted students. The novel is divided into days which function as the chapters, lasting from June 14th till August 16th. Scattered around the novel we also find “field notes” that Nic is writing, mostly containing her thoughts and feelings that she writes down. At the Siegel Institute, where the summer program is located, Nic finds herself in a friend group of diverse characters formed at the start of the program. In this friend group we also find Battle Hall Davies, or “beautiful hair girl” (p. 9) as she is first introduced as. Throughout the novel, Nic’s attraction towards Battle keeps growing, until eventually Nic accepts that she not only has a crush on Battle but is even “infatuated” with her. After a while, the feelings Nic has for Battle becomes reciprocated, and the two end up in a relationship lasting about two weeks before they split apart, splitting up their friend group in the process. Battle starts dating their other friend Kevin for some time while Nic struggles with heartbreak and moving on. Towards the ends of the book however, they reconcile, and their friend group is back together (minus Kevin). All the while Nic believes herself to be bisexual, the people around her are forcing on her a lesbian label (or “dyke” as is being used most of the time, also as a slur towards gay women). The story ends with Nic and Battle on better than good terms, implying that they might end up together again for an unspecified amount of time. The analysis will now focus on the character relationship between Nic and Battle, and how the world around them views their sexualities.

Originally published in 2001, this novel is extraordinary in the way that it gives the queer characters a “good” ending. Neither of the queer characters die or end up severely injured, which used to be the norm (Banks 35). The version used in this thesis includes an introduction made by acclaimed author David Levithan that also mentions that “when this book

was first published, much was made of the fact that it involves two girls who fall in love with each other” especially because earlier “such entanglements often led to misery, despondency, and sometimes death” (Ryan). Before the 2000’s, much of queer literature would as said not have a happy ending, and this novel then was one of the first few that started to change that. It was also “one at the vanguard of showing a much more realistic picture of what it’s like to be a lesbian, bisexual, and/or questioning teenager” (Ryan), and ultimately, novels like this are the reason that novels like *Imogen, Obviously* also would be able to be published later on. As a part of GA literature, this novel incorporates queer individuals on the same level as it does non-queer individuals. Nic and Battle are the only two queer individuals however (except for a mention of Isaac’s aunts) and are without a queer community of their own. Because of this, the novel does not fit the criteria of being QC literature, but is rather categorized as GA literature. The sexuality of the protagonist (and side character Battle) is an important part of the novel, but it is not emphasized more than what it would in a heterosexual romance. It is explicit between Nic and Battle that they are dating, and they are essential to the story (rather than just being a “random queer” they know of), but the main point is not that they are gay, but rather their romance, enhancing that “love is love” no matter the gender of the characters.

Starting June 14th at the Pruncher Hall Auditorium, we meet Nic sitting through an introductory speech about the program she is attending. During the speech Nic observes the people around her, describing some of them, most notably Battle. The people she describes later becomes her friend group; Katrina with the “gray-blue eyes and the curly red hair” (5), Isaac with the “wavy, longish, dark brown hair” (5) and closed eyes because he is asleep, and Battle with “the most beautiful hair” and eyes so green “they look like they would glow in the dark” (6). Already from the first glance upon Battle, we can see that Nic looks at her as more than just a random girl in the crowd, and is rather struck by her beauty. She has already described both Katrina and Isaac, but with only a few sentences, and not in extreme detail. With Battle however, she uses half a page to describe only her hair (6). As Nic does not describe anyone else at this speech as much as she does Battle, one can already begin to tell that Nic might find Battle attractive on more than a conventional level.

Nic continues to struggle with Battle’s beauty, as is evident when she tries to draw her. Nic learned to draw from her father, and is trying to take his advice of “breaking objects into forms” when drawing: “like he doesn’t see a head, he sees an oval” (7). But now, Nic is struggling to do just that as she “just keep seeing this girl” (7), as she has been struck by her beauty. When Battle then looks over at Nic during this speech they are listening to, Nic “start

to blush” (7), further enunciating these feelings of admiration of Battle’s physical features. When the speech is over, Katrina, or the redhead as she is still named as, sees that Nic has been drawing and asks to see the drawing. She then calls over both Isaac and Battle to see the drawings of themselves as well, and as soon as “Beautiful Hair Girl” gets the book to see her drawing, Nic “feel suddenly even more tense” (9). The body language which Nic displays in the first chapter here then insinuates that there might linger feelings of admiration more than just on a friendly level towards Battle, and that she is possibly developing a crush on her already. This again reflects the way the novel takes the notion of GA, as Nic or Battle could just as easily have been a man instead of a woman, describing someone of the opposite gender in such a way that the reader realizes that the protagonist is developing a crush on the other character. It is also again important to note how the novel differs from that of an HV novel in that the queer aspect of the novel is related to the main character as well, and not just a secondary or tertiary character that does not take up much space in the novel.

Battle too seems to reciprocate some of these feelings that Nic displays later on. Five days later the students are going on a hike arranged by the summer camp program, and Nic falls and hurts her ankle. When asked if she would like some help getting back from several of her friends, she responds with “Let’s just go” (39). Battle immediately then turns and starts to continue the hike, and Nic thinks “it’s almost as though my saying that made her angry” (39). When they get back from the hike again and find Nic (and Isaac who followed her back), Katrina messes around some with the ice packs Nic got with her from the nurse, and Battle warns her “don’t ruin that, she’s going to need it”. The body language and words from Battle gives the sense of an overprotectiveness over Nic, and Battle seemed hurt by Nic not choosing Battle to help her back from the hike. Like any other non-queer romance interest, Battle behaves with a mindset that she wants to help and protect Nic because she cares about her. Again, if we gave either of these characters a different gender, one would immediately assume that Battle was into Nic because of the protectiveness Battle displays towards Nic. Ryan depicts the start of this romance aspect of this novel the same way that any other author would depict the start of a heterosexual romance; where one realizes slowly but surely that one of the characters has developed feelings for the other, and the other reciprocates these feelings. Battle did also pick a flower for Nic from the top of the hill as “she didn’t get to see the whole field of them” so Battle thought she “should have at least one” (41). This act of affection by giving a flower showcase early that this love story would be just like any love story, whether the love interest would be a boy or a girl. Three days later again when the girls decide to go after a hurt

Isaac, Battle, suddenly angry-sounding, says to Nic “You can’t go to the river” because of her ankle (54). Katrina defends Nic saying that “it’s Nic ankle. I think she’s the one who knows whether or not it’s okay”, and to this Battle only glares, without saying anything (54). Again, Battle’s body language is of that overprotective kind, as she does not want Nic to further injure/hurt herself. When they start walking towards the river, Nic thinks to herself that she wants to tell Battle that “my ankle only hurts a little” (55). This fear of disappointment and wanting to reassure Battle that her ankle is/will be ok once again shows us that Nic does not want to be a bother for Battle. Through illustrating Battle’s overprotective feelings for Nic, Ryan reveals to the readers already a care that Battle develops towards Nic, which further develops as the summer goes on. Like Levithan said “Ryan shows that love is love, and that while same-sex love may look different to some from the outside, from the inside you can see the truth, which is that you never fall in love with a gender, but a person” (Ryan). It is never positioned as a question for the reader whether Nic or Battle could be together, but rather *when* they would end up together. There are of course some homophobic/biphobic characters in the novel, but the way Ryan writes this novel, depicting love as love no matter the gender, further reflects the GA incorporated in the novel.

Nic ends up questioning her own sexuality somewhat in the first half of the novel, but eventually almost treats it as if it is no different than if she would be straight. June 27th, a little over a week since the summer camp started, Nic starts on an assignment where she is to write an objective description of anything. Nic decides she wants to write about Battle, but soon finds out that seems impossible as she is not able to keep objective in her description, and states that “infatuation is not good scientific practice” (64). The feelings Nic develops for Battle is then not just insinuated, but Nic also admits it to herself. By calling it infatuation, Nic is admitting to developing romantic feelings for Battle, and this gives the queer romance power in a sense. We also get to know that last year, a girl named Rachel kissed Nic on the cheek during an outfit change for a play after Nic reassured her that she looked beautiful in the dress rather than fat (65). Margaret, another person on the play saw this and called Nic out for staring and calling her a “thespian lesbian” (66). This is one of the first homophobic characters also mentioned in the novel, and one can discuss whether it is the insult that makes Nic almost miss “three light cues in a row” (66), or whether it is because she is starting to question if Margaret was right, and that she is indeed queer. Coming back from this memory, Nic seems confused in her own sexuality. All the while she can see beautiful Rachel in her head, she also sees André, a boy she “spent all last year in Geometry trying desperately to attract” (66). Now then, André’s face

turns into Battles instead, and although she wishes she could stop seeing her face or “thinking about what it would feel like just to touch her hair or hold her hand” (66), she can’t. Mentioning plural sexual desires (Kneen 361) in the form of two different girls (Rachel and Battle) and one boy (André), we as readers can already tell that Nic will probably fall somewhere outside being just lesbian or straight.

Throughout the novel Nic does indeed believe herself to be bisexual rather than fully lesbian, as she has been interested in guys before, like André, just as she now is interested in Battle. After she and Battle share their first kiss (107), Nic starts to question her sexuality even more and lands on thinking that she is bisexual (109). Although she meets some resistance with her label as bisexual from her friends, she nevertheless persists on keeping the bisexual label. Isaac is the first one to label Nic as lesbian rather than bisexual, uttering that “by and by, you’ll be gay” (109) in response to Nic telling him that she thinks she is bisexual rather than lesbian. Katrina too refers to Nic and Battle as her “two favorite lesbians” (118-119) although Nic says that she doesn’t know “if that word fits” (119). Katrina insists that they just “hadn’t found a girl yet who was, you know, willing” (120), again deflecting Nic’s argument that she is bisexual because she has liked boys in the past. Katrina persists with labeling Nic and Battle as lesbians (139), and again Nic argues that she is not lesbian, but rather bisexual. This time she enunciates that “I’ve liked boys before, I probably will again, so I believe the appropriate word is *bisexual*” (139). By explicitly giving her sexuality the label bisexual, rather than leaving the readers to guess whether or not she is lesbian or not, gives the bisexual sexuality power and true visibility. It leaves the reader with acknowledgement of Nic’s bisexuality rather than having to only read between the lines and guess if she is bisexual or lesbian (or identifying as something else entirely).

It is also worth mentioning that Battle also has gone out with guys before although it has always just been “to a movie and then to the waffle house” (19), but this might also deal with the problem of heteronormativity and difficulty of expressing one’s true sexuality, especially as a young individual living in the southeast in the early 2000s. In addition, after Nic and Battle’s breakup, Battle’s is seen hooking up with and being together with Kevin, insinuating that she too might be bisexual instead of lesbian as she too exhibits plural sexual desires for more than one gender. Her sexuality is never fully disclosed however through the book as she does not explicitly define herself to be lesbian, bisexual, pansexual or otherwise. She is as Nic too categorized as queer though, as she exhibits different sexual desires than what a non-queer identity would.

For a small part of the novel, Nic does start to question whether or not her crush on Battle is a valid one in terms of the gender that Battle identifies with. She starts to struggle somewhat with internalized homophobia as she starts to call her crush on Battle “stupid” and “mind-bogglingly, earth-shatteringly dumb” (73) as although her crush on André might have been dumb, at least she “had every reason to suspect that I was of an appropriate gender to be involved with him” (73). This is the only time that Nic contemplates the different genders of her crushes, and compares and contrasts them to how society views them. A few days later however, when they are playing a volleyball game, Nic reflects that “aside from the whole gender question, Battle is beautiful and graceful and coordinated, and that just confirms there’s no hope for me” (97). Here Nic is starting to accept herself more, and manages to look at the feelings she has evolved for Battle without necessarily seeing Battle’s gender as an obstacle. Battle’s gender is still an important part of this crush Nic has on her however, but again rather than being an obstacle, it just exists. Battle has also at this point in the novel cut off her hair, disrupting gender norms as she has let go of her long and feminine hair in favor of a shorter, more masculine hairstyle. She now inhabits a more boyish look, but is nevertheless described as beautiful by Nic (81). Nic also seems to fall even more for Battle after she has cut her hair off, but not because she looks less feminine nor because she looks more masculine. “She looks much more vulnerable. Smaller. It makes me want to protect her. I don’t know from what.” (81) Nic thinks to herself. It is then evident that although Battle’s physical features change somewhat to a more masculine look, Nic still loves her regardless of her gender. This notion of wanting to protect also ties back to when Nic hurt herself and Battle displayed an overprotectiveness over her. Nic too wants to protect Battle, the same as Battle wants to protect Nic, because they both care about each other in a more intense way than what regular friends would. Nic now realizes that her feelings for Battle runs deeper than just a simple crush or infatuation as she described it earlier, and preludes the love Nic soon admits she has for Battle.

In the early 2000s, as mentioned earlier, acceptance around queerness just started to begin. Although it is mostly in younger generations that queerness is now being more accepted, queerness has always existed. Even in *Empress of the World*, another older queer couple is mentioned; Isaac’s aunt Mim and Laura. Not much is said about them other than Isaac proudly saying to Nic that his aunt is “a big old dyke!” (102), and asking Nic “does that *bother* you” (102). Like Wickens points out, this “italicized font of “bother” indicates a tone of challenge rather than defense” (153), helping the reader to understand the true meaning of his question. Isaac shows acceptance for queer identities, and his emphasis on the word “bother” tells us that

he would probably not want to keep being friends with Nic the same way if it did indeed bother her. It does not bother her however, as she follows up with “and I bet it wouldn’t bother you if I said I thought I might be one, too!” (102). As mentioned earlier, Isaac does indeed not mind that Nic (and Battle) is queer, but rather the labeling of being bisexual instead of lesbian is where they get stuck. After admitting to Isaac that it is because of Battle that she is now starting to question her sexuality, she returns to her thoughts and wonders how old Isaacs aunt was when she knew that she was queer (102). This reflects how the novel is only representative of GA representation in contrast to QC representation as any other queer communities are pictured as being far away from the queer characters. As the only other queer people mentioned in the novel, Mim and Laura are pictured as distant, both in terms of geography but also in age. There is only one other person that is mentioned that *might* be gay, as he dresses in a gender disruptive and nonconventional way with “long velvet skirts and lots of black eyeliner” (116). Nic reflects that although she has seen him make out with “various angst crows” (other girls), she “of all people should remember” (117) that he too could like boys as well as girls. Whether or not he actually does like boys as well, we never get to know, but this contemplation over other people's sexuality moves us away from HV over to GA. Where in HV literature the queer characters would be outed and such, in GA and QC we move further to the point where anyone *might* be queer, whether outed or not.

After Nic and Battle break up about midway in the summer program, Battle is as mentioned earlier, seen to be hooking up with their other friend Kevin. For other accepting people, this would support the argument that Battle is indeed bisexual as well, but for some of the characters in the novel, this supports the argument that she is straight instead. Alex and Ben, two other students at the program that is in the same class as Nic, starts to harass Nic when they are waiting for a bus to take them to an excursion. They then make the comment that “we think people like you should be given every opportunity to return to normal - like your girlfriend did” (168), referring to how Battle is now dating a boy instead of a girl. This notion of “returning to normal” implies not only that being gay is inherently wrong, and being straight is the only correct thing to be, but it also implies that there is only gay or straight, and that one could be able to “revert back” to being straight after being gay. As bisexuality is seen to fall in between gay and straight, this reversion does not really exist for other bisexual individuals. Both Alex and Ben’s opinions of reversion, and Katrina and Isaacs opinions that Nic is lesbian and not bisexual because she was dating a woman, further funnels the stereotype that they just haven’t found “the right one to turn them yet”. Whether it would be a man or a woman to make

them “stuck” in their sexuality, rather than having a fluid one like bisexuality, this stereotype is unfortunately still prominent in society today as well. The novel ends with the friend group going to a ball hosted by the summer program that they leave early from in favor of going towards the river nearby. Katrina and Isaac are seen hooking up, but Nic and Battle also get the ending they deserve. They share a kiss by the river before they “link arms and start walking back toward Pruncher Hall” (213). Nic even utters that she “want a happy ending” (212) before their shared kiss, referring to her relationship with Battle. Just as Katrina and Isaac find their happy ending in each other, developing a romantic relationship, so does Nic and Battle it is hinted at. Whether or not they end up together for the long run, we as readers do not know from this novel, but neither of the queer characters end up having a “bad” ending in terms of ending up dead, injured, or astray from their community. With this ending, Ryan breaks the norm of what queer literature usually ends with, and depicts bisexual identities as valid and something that should be emphasized rather than hidden away and downplayed.

Imogen, Obviously; Bisexual, obviously

Imogen, Obviously tells the story about Imogen who throughout the novel starts to question her sexuality before eventually coming out as bisexual. Her friend Lili, who identifies as pansexual, is a year older than Imogen, and has started college. Lili has earlier told her college friends that she and Imogen used to date as to fit better in with her queer friend group, so everyone assumes that Imogen is bisexual as that is what Lili has told them, and not heterosexual as Imogen thinks she is. When Imogen then finally visits Lili at college and meets her friends, she also meets Tessa, who happens to identify as lesbian. Over the course of a week, through physical meetings with Lili’s friend group, and texting with Tessa, Imogen realizes she is slowly falling for Tessa. Lili and Imogen’s other friend Gretchen, also identifying as a bisexual, tries to talk Imogen out of her belief that she too might be bisexual as it does not fit into Gretchen's narrative that Imogen too is queer. This creates a sort of split in their friend group towards the end, but Imogen does end up accepting herself as bisexual and then also comes out as bisexual to her friends as that is the label she finds herself most comfortable with. Tessa, the love interest of the story, reciprocates Imogen’s feelings, and together they get their happy ending of the novel. The analysis that follows will look at the character relationship between Imogen and Tessa, and how Imogen slowly but surely realizes and accepts that she is bisexual. It will also take a

look at the numerous other queer identities found within the novel, and look at how this affects the novel to be QC literature rather than GA literature.

Published in 2023, this novel depicts a much more accepting and open society. Becky Albertalli, most known for her book *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, has written a couple YA novels depicting different LGBTQ+ identities since. As different LGBTQ+ identities have become more and more accepted in today's society, its depiction in literature has also become more and more accepting and extensive. Contrary to how *Empress of the World* is written as GA literature, *Imogen, Obviously* is written as QC literature as it depicts queer identities as a regular phenomenon in society, as well as depicting queer communities central to the story. The novel incorporates several different queer identities, where the protagonist's sexuality is that of a minority, namely bisexual. Many of these queer identities are both secondary characters and friends of the protagonist, but there are also mentions of other queer identities throughout the novel. The queer identities mentioned are also not just one time mentioned, but rather they create their own community, being central throughout the novel. Both the pride alliance meetings mentioned in the novel create a community of queer identities and allies, and Lili's friend group create their own little queer community. Queer identities and communities are then a given in this novel, reflecting real life, and thus giving a more realistic perspective of how queer identities and communities behave together.

Already from Imogen's first meeting with Tessa, her attraction towards Tessa can be seen in the way Imogen describes her. In the first chapter we get to know that Imogen is the type of person to have a favorite adverb, which happens to be "obviously" (5). When Tessa first steps into Lili's dorm, Imogen immediately recognizes her from Lili's pictures and refers to her as "obviously Tessa" after describing how she looks (33). The implication of "obviously" being Imogen's favorite word then in referring to Tessa already gives us an idea that Imogen might find Tessa attractive or interesting on a higher level than what one would normally do with someone one has just met. Imogen also describes Tessa as having "big brown Winona Ryder eyes" and "Clea DuVall freckles" (33). Starring in *But I'm A Cheerleader*, Imogen's favorite movie (14), Clea DuVall is a name we see throughout the novel as a celebrity Imogen thinks of highly. Later we find out that Imogen considers Clea DuVall to be her first queer celebrity crush (319), and this comparison between Clea DuVall and Tessa gives us an idea that Imogen might find Tessa attractive on more than just a conventional level. After Imogen and Lili get back to Lili's dorm after meeting the rest of the friend group, Lili apologizes in a playful way to Imogen for Tessa "being a flirt" (48), to which Imogen starts to blush. From

these descriptions of Tessa and the way Imogen reacts when Lili talks about her, it is clear that Imogen might start to become attracted to Tessa in a non-platonic way.

After only two days Imogen admits to herself that she would be losing her mind over Tessa if she were queer (116). Which after reading further in the novel, one can clearly tell that she is. When they first meet, we already know that Tessa's looks are catching Imogen's eye, and her boyish gesture leaves her off-balance (34), in addition to Imogen finding Tessa's hair so nice that she admits that "if I were really bi, I bet I'd fall for her based-on hair alone" (35). When later Lili points out that Tessa is "being a flirt", Imogen starts to blush (48), and when Tessa gives Imogen the nickname "Scott" over a text message between the two, Imogen gets a flutter in her chest and really likes it when Tessa says her last name so casual. This then can remind us of how someone might feel or act when their crush acknowledges them or gives them attention, and thus we can see Imogen's subconscious feelings about Tessa coming to light throughout the text. During a prank they carry out with two other friends (Lili and Kayla), Imogen and Tessa end up in a closet together trying to hide from Declan, the guy they are trying to prank (107). As Imogen's heart is "going a little bit haywire" (108), they stare at each other, and a bubble of laughter rises from Imogen's chest (108). Luckily, Tessa is able to put her hand over Imogen's mouth before any laughter erupts, and in this moment, Imogen starts to ponder whether Tessa is hot or not (108). After they get out of the closet and are on their way back to their dorms, Imogen's head is "still in Declan's closet" (109) and is unsure how to tackle the part where Tessa's smile made her chest hurt, and how she "sort of wanted to kiss it" ("it" being Tessa's hand) (110). The tension between the two characters is starting to rise, and one can clearly tell that Imogen is starting to develop a crush on Tessa. Imogen, however oblivious to her queer sexuality so far in the novel, does not necessarily think of these feelings for Tessa as romantic yet, although when later the friend group is going to a thrift store, Imogen finds out that Tessa is not coming to join them, and she feels almost sad as this hits her "like a punch" (125), although she cannot tell the reason for *why* it feels like a punch. She even reflects on it herself when she thinks "Tessa's not coming. And I don't know why I care" (126). Her subconsciousness can then be said to be aware already that Tessa is being acknowledged as a crush, although her consciousness is still in denial. One could argue however, that if Tessa was a man instead of a woman, that Imogen already would be falling head over heels for them and realizing that she was as well.

Tessa, an openly lesbian woman, can be seen as reciprocating these subconscious feelings that Imogen starts to develop for her. Although being labeled "a flirt" (48) by Lili,

Tessa does not seem to flirt as much with the other characters as she does Imogen. By believing Imogen to be bisexual (as that is what Lili has told them), flirting with her in this capacity can then be seen as *actually* flirting with Imogen contrary to just being a flirt. By having an openly lesbian character flirting with a presumed bisexual character, one does not necessarily need to imagine different genders of the characters as they are attracted to each other the same way that two straight people of opposite genders would, but for the sake of a comparison towards heteronormative literature we will. Had Tessa indeed been a straight man, and Imogen a straight woman, the flirting depicted between them would indeed insinuate that the two were about to develop romantic feelings for each other. However, by having Tessa be a lesbian woman and Imogen (later coming out as) a bisexual woman, Albertalli like Ryan, depicts love as love no matter the genders of their characters. By giving the characters labels early on, Albertalli creates a setting in her novel that reflects QC in the way that, although many of the characters “outs” themselves in terms of introducing themselves with their sexuality, their “outing” is not seen as something out of the ordinary. The novel differs from HV and GA as it depicts not just one or two central characters to the story that identifies as queer, but it also depicts the queer consciousness in society as well as a central queer community. The notion that anyone could be queer at any point, and that their sexuality can be subject to change is prominent throughout the novel, and will be discussed later on.

If we take a look again at Clea DuVall and her importance, we will by the end of the book realize that although Imogen might have believed herself to be straight all this time, there have been “all these moments, scattered and separate” (322) that point towards Imogen’s queerness. Already in chapter 2 Imogen mentions that one of her favorite movies is “*But I’m A Cheerleader*” (14), a movie about a girl questioning her sexuality and, in the end, coming to terms with being lesbian. Later again when she is texting with Tessa about their favorite movies, she again mentions that BIAC is her favorite movie (230). She also admits that she would “kiss Clea DuVall as Graham in *But I’m A Cheerleader*” (67), and again later contemplates whether it would be weird or problematic for her to say that Clea DuVall was her first queer celebrity crush when Lili’s friend group is talking about their first queer celebrity crushes (319). Imogen admits to the reader that when she was younger, she “used to get hung up on certain girls (...) especially if they were queer” (156-157). She never knew how to describe this feeling she got about them without it sounding like a crush, which is something it might as well have been. When she now again tries to describe this feeling she had for these girls, she compares it to the way she feels about boy crushes. Where her boy crushes usually

consist of “that thunderstorm of feeling - electric, all-consuming, blaringly loud”, these possible girl crushes were “more like that feeling you get when you finish a book, and your brain can’t quite shake it” (157). Up until Imogen visits Lili at her college, Imogen has believed herself all her life to be nothing but “hopelessly, blindingly, *obviously* straight” (37). She admits that she has earlier wanted a boyfriend, and that she still does (28), underlining her “straight” sexuality. This “straight” sexuality, however, soon changes as she meets Tessa, evident by their flirting and romantic feelings developing.

When having her first daydream about Tessa, Imogen convinces herself that she is essentially appropriating queerness rather than thinking that she might actually be queer herself (156). She also admits, as mentioned earlier, that she would sometimes “get hung up on certain girls” when she was younger, especially if “they were queer” (156-157). This fixation of these women is something that seems hard for Imogen to explain “without it sounding like a crush” (157), because that might be exactly what it is, a crush. These feelings she has for these girls then, however, are being described differently from what her crushes on boys usually feels like. As mentioned earlier, her boy crushes feel almost like a thunderstorm “electric, all-consuming, blaringly loud in my head”, and with her girl crushes it felt more like “when you finish a book and your brain can’t quite shake it” (157). We do not get to know about any specific boy crushes she has had, but she does as mentioned admit to wanting a boyfriend, which signals a romantic desire for men. Imogen does, however, reminisce over different girls which she most likely had a crush on but did not realize at the time, signaling romantic desires for women as well, and fulfills Kneens criteria of pleural sexual desires. The first girl she reminisces about is someone named Nisha Khatoon which she met through the pride alliance meetings at their school. Imogen does not say that she had a crush on Nisha, but rather that “if I *were* queer, I’d probably be attracted to her”, followed up by “just like with Tessa” (157). The implication of ending the sentence with “just like with Tessa” tells the reader that she did indeed have other feelings than just platonic towards Nisha, as Imogen is indeed attracted to Tessa, evident by the inevitable kiss they share later on. Imogen has yet to realize at this point that she does indeed have a crush on Tessa this far in the novel, and these other girls that she mentions further add to Imogen’s unknown queerness. “*Le dollar bean* girl” is another girl that Imogen mentions in the context of these possibly queer girls that she has fixated on earlier. She tries to contextualize these feelings she is starting to realize that she has developed towards Tessa by comparing them to how she has felt towards these other girls earlier, and tries to convince herself that they were not crushes either. In contrast to her boy crushes she mentions she has had, these possible girl

crushes “always felt like someone else’s daydream - something I walked out of the store with and forgot to pay for” (158), further enhancing this belief that Imogen inhabits of herself being straight, and could possibly never be queer.

From chapter 26-29, Imogen is further questioning her sexuality. Not only does she start to realize that she might have a crush on Tessa, as well as starting to realize that she had a crush on these other girls as mentioned, but she also does what any other teenager questioning their sexuality does; she takes an online quiz. Albertalli depicts this painfully accurately, as one of the questions is if she has romantic daydreams about “only one gender (my gender/not my gender)”, “multiple genders”, and “no one” (202). As she contemplates how literal she is supposed to answer the question, her mind wanders and thinks about these earlier girls she has daydreamed about before, and most notably Tessa. As soon as Tessa pops up in her mind in relation to this question she is trying to answer, she inevitably starts to actually daydream about Tessa, illustrating that she does indeed daydream about girls the same way that she would daydream about boys. She does not come to a conclusion yet however, but she does admit to herself that she is indeed flirting with Tessa. When she later again contemplates whether or not she actually is queer, she starts to deny that she is queer and believes that it is only the people-pleaser in her “trying to be what everyone wants me to be” (262). It is important to note however, that Imogen's denial towards her queerness is not because she believes it is wrong for her to be queer, but rather that she does not believe herself to be *queer enough*. She says she measures queerness against Edith, her (presumably lesbian) little sister (190), who has known ever since she was little that she “was going to marry a girl” (90). Imogen has never really thought about the possibility that she too might be queer, and because of Edith’s sureness from such a young age, Imogen believes that since she has not realized her own queerness yet that she can not be queer as well. Always labeling and introducing herself as having a queer sister (38), she has never made space for exploring her own sexuality in the same terms.

Imogen does however end up feeling comfortable with identifying as bisexual by the end of the novel, but she does take the long route before ending up there. The friend group attends a party at the end of the week, where throughout the night, Imogen and Tessa keep continuously flirting with each other before Imogen eventually kisses Tessa (338). Right before the kiss happened, Imogen and Lili went to the bathroom at the party they were at. After having flirted with Tessa the entire day, Lili reassures Imogen that she does not have to overextend because of the lie Lili told to her friends about Imogen being bisexual. When Lili then asks, “it’s real, right?” referring to how Imogen flirts with Tessa and the probable romantic feelings

underlying, she nods (330). In this moment, Imogen then essentially comes out to Lili, and in a way to herself as well. After she kisses Tessa, she is almost surprised at herself that she did, because in her words she is never the one who initiates stuff like that “because that would mean this is something I’m certain about” (338). Imogen admits to herself then that she is certain of her sexuality, or at least certain that she likes Tessa as more than a friend. She worries that she might be faking her bisexuality or that it is not real, asking her sister “How do I know it’s not a fluke? What if I only ever fall for one girl?”, and questioning whether or not Tessa’s boyishness would be an indication that she is not queer, but rather attracted to masculine features. Edith reassures her however, saying that “then you’re bi”, and when following up with a question related to the concept of boyishness whether “is she a boy?”, and concluding when Imogen answers “no”, that it “sounds pretty bi” (353-354). Through this conversation with Edith then, Imogen comes to terms with her plural sexual desires, and feels comfortable identifying as bisexual. Although Imogen might not have seen it obvious at the start that she too might be queer, us readers, especially us queer readers, are able to read between the lines and see that she is *obviously* queer. Of course, we also have the upper hand in knowing that this is a queer book written by a queer author, but again, the elements which the book touches upon truly communicates that this character is also most likely queer in a way, but just has not realized it yet. Her favorite adverb word might be “obviously” even though things might not be as obvious as she believes it to be.

Tessa’s gender is never deposited as a problem or an obstacle for Imogen as a potential crush, but rather the fact that Imogen believes herself to be queerbaiting Tessa as she is yet to acknowledge her own queerness. However, Tessa’s gender disruptiveness can be seen as an obstacle which Imogen is unsure how to surmount. By cutting her hair short and dressing in more masculine clothes, Tessa contests the notion of femininity, and inhabits what Gretchen, another friend of Imogen, explains as the “Ruby Rose effect” (291), where essentially, she would look genderfluid enough to attract specifically straight girls. By this comparison, Gretchen also invalidates Imogen’s till-now questioning crush. Like Battle, Tessa exhibits less feminine traits through their physique, and in turn attracts the protagonist of the novels. It is not *because* of their gender disruption, acting and looking less feminine than the “average” woman that the protagonist falls for them, but it is one of many factors to why they fall for them. There are also other characters displaying a disruption of their gender assigned at birth, one of them being Mika. Mika, a Japanese-American friend of Lili, identifies as nonbinary and displays a blend of “masculine and feminine aesthetics” (19). Having several of the secondary

characters displaying a disruption of their gender assigned at birth contributes to the categorization of this novel as QC literature. As there are few non-binary characters depicted in literature, representation like this is also important in terms of portraying real queer communities.

There is also a wide range of other queer characters and identities in the novel, illustrating how QC is incorporated into the novel. Both of Imogen's best friends identify as queer, where Lili identifies as pansexual⁴, and Gretchen identifies as bisexual. Lili does also throughout the novel contemplate whether or not she might be demisexual⁵ as well, portraying sexuality as fluid rather than permanent and unalterable. Her sister, Edith, is also queer, although not explicitly labeled, she does have a girlfriend, and already from preschool announces that "she was going to marry a girl" (90), and from this we can assume that she identifies as lesbian. Lili's friend group at college, as mentioned earlier, also consist of a variety of queer characters and identities. Tessa identifies as a lesbian (35) as mentioned earlier, Kayla and Declan are both identifying as bisexual (132), and they even have a non-binary member of their group named Mika (19). This is the most prominent part that separates this novel from HV and GA literature, and rather characterizes it as QC literature. Where in HV and GA literature, the queer community would always be seen as far away from the queer character(s), it is now incorporated into the story. The queer characters in the novel both form their own little queer community, but other queer communities are also mentioned. The other queer communities are also never seen as far away from the queer characters either, often either seen as close by in terms of pride alliance meetings hosted at their schools, or found easily online. The party that the group attends as well at the end of the week, is hosted at "Rainbow Manor" (326), an inclusive space for queers at Lili's campus with a sign saying, "*Welcome to Rainbow Manor: If you're out, come on in!*" (325), implying that anyone who is out of the closet is welcomed and accepted in this place. There is a queer consciousness that is evident throughout the novel, where, although some of the characters "come out" when introducing themselves etc., the notion that anyone can be queer does not diminish their character in any way. Lastly, it is important to note that Imogen and Tessa also get their happy ending. We are moving further

⁴ According to Killermann, a person identifying as pansexual is "a person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions. Often shortened to "pan."" (25)

⁵ According to Killermann, a person identifying as demisexual experiences "little or no capacity to experience sexual attraction until a strong romantic connection is formed with someone, often within a romantic relationship" (17)

and further away from the concept of the queer characters either dying, getting severely injured, or moved away from their community. As with any other straight romance, Imogen and Tessa go through obstacles before ending up together by the end of the novel. Neither of the characters “revert” back to “normal”, in other words fulfilling a heteronormative narrative, but rather they embrace their queerness together.

Chapter 2: Still here, still queer

“I want a happy ending, goddamnit” (Ryan 212)

Ever since *I'll get there. It better be worth the trip* by John Donovan was written and published in 1969 as the first LGBTQ+ themed literature in the YA genre, the way for LGBTQ+ themed YA fiction has spurred in growth. Through the 1990-1999, there were 78 titles marketed for LGBTQ+ YA literature, while between 2000-2009, the number had jumped to 252 titles (Jenkins and Cart 93)⁶. Attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people started to change even before the 21st century, but took an even sharper turn after the 20th century had its end. Despite the US Supreme Court overruling a long-standing Texas sodomy law with *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas* in 2002, Jenkins and Cart underline that “if history is any indicator, it will be a while before those radical changes become routine staples of young adult literature” (107). This chapter seeks to explore this evolution in how LGBTQ+ identities, specifically the bisexual identity, have been represented throughout the 21st century, using the novels analyzed earlier. It will also look at the importance of this evolution for the target audience for these books, namely young adults, and why it is important that we keep these LGBTQ+ identities in YA literature.

Bisexuality narrated; then vs. now

For a novel to be able to represent bisexuality in a good light, Kneen argues that the novel will need to recognize “embodied plural sexual desires of bisexual characters” (361). The bisexual characters will then have to, either explicitly or implicitly, showcase (sexual) desires for more than one gender. Like Lambert also argues, it is also important that these bisexual characters are well drawn and non-stereotyped, “whose thoughts and feelings about their bisexuality are explored in the story” (156-157). Just like any other straight or gay character, the bisexual character too deserves to be written as their own person with deep thoughts and feelings, not playing on harmful stereotypes. Among adults identifying as LGBTQ+, the slight majority is actually bisexual people (Shaw 23). Although statistically there exist more people identifying as bisexuals than lesbian/gay, the skewed difference in representation in literature is astonishing. Between 1997, when the first YA novel with a nuanced bisexual character was published (M. E. Kerr’s *Hello, I Lied*), and 2016, only 21 novels with such content have been published (Jenkins and Cart 149). If we take into consideration the 592 YA novels

⁶ This number is not absolute however as the book industry does not keep count of the total number of YA books published annually, see Jenkins and Cart for more information.

published between 2000-2016 then (Jenkins and Cart 125), having only 21 of these novels containing nuanced bisexual characters is an extremely low percentage, and again heavily contrasts the statistics in adult queers and which sexual identity they identify with.

Oftentimes, the bisexual representation that has existed, has not fulfilled what neither Epstein, Kneen, nor Lambert argued is needed for good representation. Like Epstein argues himself, many of the bisexual characters are not “described positively, nor are they shown living happy bisexual lives” (119). Although there is not a lot of representation, the little representation that exists is often thus not very supportive of the bisexual identity. The bisexual characters are often described in negative terms, shown to be unhappy and divided because of their “confusing” sexuality as many of them will struggle to accept their bisexual identity (Epstein 122). The characters will often either want to settle on identifying as either gay or straight, and being something in between/other seems unlikely and not an option. There exists then this inherent biphobia in many YA novels, which, as Pallotta-Chiarolli argues, in turn can lead to internalized bi-negativity and biphobia in the children and young people reading these novels (11). In addition, LGBTQ+ characters have in general oftentimes had a “bad ending” to their story, either with them ending up dead or gone from the town/community/family they originally were a part of (Banks 35). This includes bisexual characters as well, where they sometimes as well end up “reverting” back to a straight identity, or in general having to choose between a straight identity or a gay/lesbian identity (Jenkins and Cart 157). By having to “settle” on a rigid identity, the queer depiction defeats the purpose of sexual and gender fluidity, and thus also the entire concept of bisexuality. This narrative of LGBTQ+ characters getting a “bad ending” to their story was very consistent from 1980 to 1995, but has luckily evolved away from it since then (Banks 35). During the 2000s we see an increase in LGBTQ+ identities in YA literature where these LGBTQ+ characters survive to the end of the novels, and happy endings are becoming more common for LGBTQ+ identities in LGBTQ+ YA literature.

But if all YA literature contains only negative representation on bisexuality, how could the young adults reading the novels be expected to handle their own and other’s bisexual identity in a positive way? Where gay and lesbian identities in YA literature have throughout the years evolved from being given “bad endings” to being given more and more “happy endings”, bisexual identities in YA literature is in itself still behind in terms of “good” character representations. GA literature seems to now equal or outpace HV literature, but QC literature is struggling to keep up (Jenkins and Cart 138). The reason for this, however, is because the earliest literature were mostly written as HV literature, so a surplus of HV literature is then

natural. GA literature then starting to equal or outpace HV literature shows us a trend of better representation of the LGBTQ+ characters depicted in YA literature. Many novels will depict either lesbian women or gay men, but almost never both in the same novel, reflecting the lack of QC literature (Jenkins and Cart 130), and gay depiction remains superior towards lesbian depiction in YA novels (Jenkins and Cart 129). *Imogen, Obviously* handles this aspect better than other YA novels have done earlier as it includes depictions of queer men, women, and non-binary characters, all either the main character or secondary characters significant to the story. Although Declan identifies as bisexual rather than being a gay man, he is still a queer man represented alongside other queer women (and one non-binary character). As in reality, relationships and alliances commonly exist between male and female queer identities (and other non-gendered identities) and depicting this in an authentic way in YA literature is important for LGBTQ+ young adults.

The LGBTQ+ community has as mentioned become more integrated into literature, so much that it is not only in the contemporary realism genre that LGBTQ+ characters can be found, but they are now also appearing in fantasy, dystopian, contemporary non-fiction, romance, science fiction and more (Jenkins and Cart 93). Incorporating LGBTQ+ characters in other genres under YA literature shows us that LGBTQ+ identities are not only reserved for one genre, and again helps to normalize the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, not only in literature but also in reality. We are, as Lewis says, “offered much more realistic and positive representation of LGBTQ teens than in past decades” (53), which is evident in, amongst other, how *Imogen, Obviously* represents LGBTQ+ characters in 2023, in contrast to how *Empress of the World* represented LGBTQ+ characters in 2001. This is, however, connected to the general consensus of society at the times these books were written, meaning that there will indubitably be less LGBTQ+ representation in a more homophobic society than in a society more accepting of LGBTQ+ identities. Luckily, society has become more acceptable to the LGBTQ+ community and the different identities it includes than what it was in the early 2000s, which is consequently reflected in the literature featuring LGBTQ+ identities.

Jenkins and Cart mention twelve salutary changes related to LGBTQ+ depiction in YA literature, two of them related to having more queer protagonists, and also younger queer protagonists (126-129). As mentioned earlier, the LGBTQ+ characters in earlier literature would often be secondary or tertiary characters, oftentimes the protagonist’s friend or an older adult they know of. Now however, there is an evident increase in the number of LGBTQ+ protagonists as well as LGBTQ+ secondary characters (Jenkins and Cart 129). As Jenkins and

Cart point out, there has been an uptick in books with LGBTQ+ protagonists as opposed to LGBTQ+ secondary characters (126), which in turn gives us more insight into *how* these queer characters think and feel rather than reading about these LGBTQ+ characters from a straight perspective. By doing this, the authors give the reader a closer relationship to these queer characters than what they would have had if the queer character was only a secondary or even a tertiary character to the story. In addition, as Jenkins and Cart further add, many of these LGBTQ+ protagonists from the 2000s are also depicted as younger than what they had been earlier. We now have a growth in LGBTQ+ protagonists all the way down to middle school age recognizing their own same sex attractions (Jenkins and Cart 100). *Empress of the World* may not be middle school age, but even having a protagonist at the age of 15 recognizing their own *bisexuality* and not just their own homosexuality, is a big steppingstone, leading the way for other LGBTQ+ protagonists at the same age, and even younger to be written about.

We now return to the importance of queer history, with a focus on bisexual history, and how this tie in with YA literature. As mentioned earlier, the general populations LGBTQ+ members mostly consist of bisexual members, and bisexual members outweigh both gay and lesbian members in the general population. We do however find very little scholarly and popular discourse regarding bisexuality in contrast to homosexuality, mismatching the bisexual incidence in the general population (Kneen 362). This also pertains to the YA genre, where there is very little bisexual themed literature in contrast to gay or lesbian themed literature (and even less pertaining to transgender, non-binary, or other relevant LGBTQ+ themed literature!). As Kneen points out, this “absence of bisexuality in YA fiction thus follows (and reinforces) a broader invisibility that is likely to shape most teenagers’ lived experiences of bisexuality” (363), further reflecting the superiority gay and lesbian representation has in literature. There has however become a recent growth of books featuring bisexual characters as Jenkins and Cart points out as one of their twelve salutary changes (126), however the actual number of novels featuring bisexual characters is still “depressingly small” (149). Without proper representation, bisexual teens will lack what gay and lesbian teens gain from representation and acceptance in YA literature. Societal acceptance will become more difficult to attain for bisexual teens compared to gay and lesbian teens partly because of this deficiency of good bisexual representation in YA literature.

It is also important to remember that sexuality is fluid, and many queer people may end up changing their label several times before they find a label they are comfortable with (or they might even drop having a label at all). As Jenkins points out however “there is a general

unwillingness in this literature to represent sexual orientation as anything other than permanent and unalterable” (325). This can further be harmful for young adults, as YA literature can exert a “powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation” (Coats 315). Like Lewis argues, “YA novels need not be so tied up in labels or titles in order to offer a positive and enlightening depiction of LGBTQ characters” (57). It is undoubtedly important to give characters labels so that we do get explicit LGBTQ+ representation, but focusing too heavily on giving the characters *unalterable* labels can do more harm than good. It is then important for authors to also show the readers that the queer labels given to their queer characters can be alterable and are not always permanent. Like Declan and Kayla, both bisexual characters in *Imogen, Obviously*, are insinuated to be in a relationship by the end of the novel, but their bisexual identity is still intact although they could now “pass as a straight couple” as they are dating someone of the opposite gender. However, no one questions whether or not they are bisexual anymore, if it was all just a phase or if they have actually always been straight because they are now dating someone of the opposite gender. They are both still accepted as bisexual characters, and are just as valid in terms of queerness as Imogen, who by the end of the novel starts to date someone of the same gender as herself. If Kayla or Declan *were* to change their sexuality label however, that too would be seen as ok as sexuality is fluid and can be subject to change at any point.

Lili is another queer character in *Imogen, Obviously* that recently came out in the story, just a short year before Imogen, but their sexuality is also depicted as being fluid. Lili, coming out as pansexual to Imogen about a year before the story of the novel takes place, now starts to question her sexuality labels again throughout the main story of the novel. Starting to question if she might also be demisexual as well as pansexual further enunciates this notion of sexuality being fluid and not necessarily permanent and unalterable. One can also identify with several labels at once, like Lili who already identified as pansexual can also be demisexual at the same time without these sexualities contradicting. She might even end up changing which label(s) she is comfortable with again at a later point in time. With YA literature depicting this notion of fluid sexualities, we create a safer environment for these LGBTQ+ teens to explore and question their own possibilities for fluid sexualities. Like Blackburn et al. concludes, “exploring possibilities of sexual and gender identities that are multiple, variable, and fluid might alleviate some of the pressure of being or becoming someone who is socially acceptable and soothe the anxieties associated with being or becoming someone who is not” (44). Teenagers' lives are already hectic enough as it is with school and social life, and having to

find a permanent “for life” sexuality label at such a young age can seem like an obstacle difficult to maneuver, when in reality, such an obstacle should not exist at all. Good representation of fluid and alterable sexualities can then help alleviate these anxieties and uncertainties associated with sexualities and different labels as the young adults may feel as they find others who may struggle with the same problems as they do.

The importance of keeping LGBTQ+ identities in YA literature

Queer history is also important in general for anyone identifying as queer or as part of the LGBTQ+ community. By keeping and retelling queer history, we in turn also normalize queer identities and lives (Shaw 34). Whether these queer identities and lives in history are bisexual, gay, lesbian, or otherwise associated with the LGBTQ+ community, they nevertheless create a safer and more inclusive society for the queer identities and lives alive today. Where homosexuals have been characterized as “lost souls doomed to either premature death or the solitary life of exile at the margins of society” (Jenkins and Cart xii), queer protagonists in modern YA literature now have the potential to redress these harmful attitudes and demonstrate that this is not the case. Although, as we have seen, HV literature is still the category in which we find most of the LGBTQ+ representation due to it being the first category in which LGBTQ+ novels were written in. The shift over to GA representation and somewhat QC representation is a testament however, that the queer community is becoming more and more visible and represented in literature. This corroborates the notion that queer depictions over time have gotten an increasingly positive presence and become more inclusive in YA literature (Blackburn et al. 42). Where *Empress of the World* only really includes two queer pairs (Isaac’s aunts and Nic and Battle), *Imogen, Obviously* includes several queer identities, both in relationships and not, illustrating this shift over to more explicitly queer and visible characters in YA literature.

Becky Albertalli, the author of *Imogen, Obviously* has written more than just one queer book, and became a Lambda Award finalist for her debut novel *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* in 2015 in the category Children’s/Young Adult. In this novel, as well as the other LGBTQ+ themed novels she has since written, QC is a very visible trait. Her books include not only a protagonist that realizes that they are queer, but they also include secondary and tertiary characters that also fall into the queer spectrum. Most notably is of course *Imogen, Obviously* as discussed in this thesis, and contains not just a wide range of different members of the LGBTQ+ community, but they also interact as an actual *community*. Where earlier, as

Jenkins points out, the queer community has always been elsewhere in YA literature, and thus distant from the protagonist and the reader (310), it is now being incorporated more alongside with the protagonist. *Empress of the World* does not contain any sort of queer community that neither Nic nor Battle is a part of, whereas *Imogen, Obviously* keeps its queer communities at the center of the story. As Imogen visits Lili, she also meets her “queer community of friends” as all of them identify as queer in one way or the other, in addition to Pride-Alliance meetings functioning as other not-so-central queer communities in the novel. The main queer community in this story then is this friend group of Lili’s which Imogen becomes an integral part of, and with the help of this community Imogen too finds a label she is comfortable with. There are also the other more distant but nevertheless important queer communities mentioned in the novel, like the different Pride-Alliance meetings hosted at both Imogen’s school and Gretchen’s old school, in addition to “Rainbow Manor”, a house on Lili’s campus dedicated to creating a safe space for queer individuals. “Rainbow Manor” helps to illustrate that there exist different sizes to queer communities, and how both smaller and bigger queer communities can be important to include.

Literature with LGBTQ+ themes are not only important to those children and teenagers that themselves struggle with their own sexual and gender identity, but it is also important to the children and teenagers that *don’t* struggle with their own sexual and gender identity. To those identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community, finding representation of their own sexual and gender identities can feel invigorating and give a sense of approval and belongingness. As Blackburn et al. argues, “studying texts for disruption of sexuality and gender norms provides students with a wider array of ways of being in the world” (44). Creating a safer and more acceptable society starts with the younger generations as they are the ones who will eventually “inherit the world” and thus also the society that follows with them. By incorporating an insight into the LGBTQ+ world for children and young adults, most notably through school, one can then give children, like Epstein says, “the opportunity to read and learn about various kinds of people, backgrounds, and perspectives, and of course it also offers them the chance to read about other people like themselves” (111), and thus educate children and young adults in such a way that they become more accepting towards LGBTQ+ identities than what earlier generations might have been.

Many students struggle to acknowledge and accept the LGBTQ+ community when they themselves are not a part of it, and may not understand the viewpoint from someone who is a part of the LGBTQ+ community. One can try to combat this with pamphlets or better sexuality

education, but literature can also be used for this same purpose, and can seem to be a less cold and impersonal way for the students to attain this knowledge of these different LGBTQ+ identities and their perspectives (Epstein 116). As many students might find topics such as these awkward, embarrassing, or uncomfortable, teachers could take an approach like this and be less involved in a way, creating space for the students themselves to acquire their own thoughts about the topic at hand. It is however important to think of how one positions their students when reading LGBTQ+ themed literature in a class. Like Clark and Blackburn says, “By refusing to position students as homophobes, teachers can, from the start, disrupt the heteronormativity that is so typical in classrooms and challenge students to live up to the expectation of being supportive of LGBT rights and people” (28). Classrooms and other social spaces are supposed to be spaces for *everyone*, which then includes LGBTQ+ identities to be on the same level as non-LGBTQ+ identities. Making sure that every student feels welcomed and accepted is an important part of a teacher's job, but is also imposed upon other adults in the children's lives. There will always be students refusing to acknowledge and accept LGBTQ+ people, but by placing them away from this position as homophobes from the start, teachers can start to challenge this heteronormativity that exists, and enforce a more accepting classroom.

One would also have to read this LGBTQ+ themed literature throughout the school year too however, as if one were to do it only one time it could signify to the students that LGBTQ+ identities too is a one-time thing and thus not important enough to be talked about all year round. It is also important that the LGBTQ+ representation “offer positive, complex representation of LGBTQ characters and themes (Lewis 57). By incorporating LGBTQ+ themed literature throughout the school year, Clark and Blackburn points out that it would “disrupt the notion of what is normal” and “the students would be challenged repeatedly to consider what it means for them to be LGBTQ, allied, or homophobic” (29). By not incorporating LGBTQ+ themed literature, “classrooms that hope to foster respect and acceptance of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression” (Letcher 123) may struggle to achieve just this. Consistency is then important, and upkeep in terms of different representation in literature (amongst other subjects) can then help to foster this respect and acceptance the students are to attain for other people.

Several scholars agree that we should keep LGBTQ+ themed books in our classrooms and on our shelves (Banks; Letcher; Pallotta-Chiarolli; Jenkins and Cart). Like Letcher concludes, “our LGBTQ students need and deserve to read good books as much as anyone

else” (125-126), illustrating how important this topic is for the target audience of YA literature, namely children, teens, and other young adults. We also often have, as Letcher says, “some students who could learn from the lessons of tolerance and acceptance illustrated by these authors” (126), further underlining the arguments that LGBTQ+ themed books is not just written for LGBTQ+ readers, but it is also relevant and important for those readers who do not identifying with the LGBTQ+ community. Incorporating other LGBTQ+ identities in literature is also extremely important then, as there exists other important sexual and gender identities other than heterosexual, homosexual, and cis-gender that need to become visible for students. Many young adults, both those trying to find a label more fitting than heterosexual or homosexual and those comfortable with those labels, might feel confused and lost navigating through these different and “new” sexual and gender identities. The queer young adult genre is in general “becoming more inclusive and is working toward more positive representation” (Lewis 54), although there is still some way before it can be seen as equal to heteronormative literature. Exposing young readers to these LGBTQ+ friendly books enhance this notion of creating a more accepting and tolerant society, and can then help them find the explanations and create awareness of these different sexualities and genders.

Conclusion

As we have explored in this thesis, the young adult genre has come a long way in terms of depicting accurate LGBTQ+ identities. Before the 2000s, much of YA literature featuring LGBTQ+ identities were categorized as HV literature, namely literature where LGBTQ+ identities (mostly gay or lesbian identities) were only visible to the protagonist, and never manifested itself in the protagonist. Many of these novels would also end badly for these LGBTQ+ identities, either by getting severely injured, driven away from their family/communities, or even end up dead. From the 2000s however, we saw a change in LGBTQ+ YA literature, where many of the novels would now feature more LGBTQ+ protagonists as well as LGBTQ+ secondary characters. Categorized as GA literature, the YA literature featuring LGBTQ+ identities would now incorporate more good endings for these LGBTQ+ identities, diverging away from the “bad ending” trend. Many of these novels, however, would feature only a few LGBTQ+ identities, mainly in the form of the protagonist or their friend(s). As society grew more accepting of LGBTQ+ identities, so did also literature grow to become more accepting of LGBTQ+ identities. From the 2010s we started seeing even more QC literature being published alongside the numerous GA literature that was also being published. Starting to equal or outpace HV literature, GA literature is quickly on its way to become the largest of the three categories. In recent years however, more QC literature is being published, featuring queer identities in *communities*, reflecting how queer individuals behave together in reality.

Much of the LGBTQ+ themed YA literature that has been, and is currently being published, features mostly gay or lesbian identities, and oftentimes not both in the same novel. There is nevertheless being published more LGBTQ+ YA literature that depicts other queer identities including, but not limited to, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and questioning characters. This thesis has explored the evolution of the bisexual representation found within YA literature from the early 2000s, to the 2020s. Through an analysis of *Empress of the World* by Sara Ryan, and *Imogen, Obviously* by Becky Albertalli, we have seen that the bisexual identity has gotten a more nuanced depiction in YA literature. There is however a general consensus that, although we have gotten more bisexual representation in YA literature, there is still a long way to go as there exists an inherent “bisexual invisibility” caused by both a disproportionate representation and applied harmful stereotypes. Many novels play on these harmful stereotypes connected to bisexuality, and are then invalidating the bisexual identity. Through depicting the bisexual identity as a sexual identity with plural sexual desires, and not

denouncing the bisexual identity despite the bisexual character finding a partner, one creates a more accurate representation for the bisexual identity.

We have also seen that, where *Empress of the World* is written as GA literature, as the LGBTQ+ identities found within the novel are not depicted alongside a queer community, *Imogen, Obviously* contains several different LGBTQ+ communities, with different LGBTQ+ identities interacting with each other. We can thus clearly see a trend in LGBTQ+ themed YA literature, moving through the three different categories HV, GA, and QC, where we are now entering the threshold between GA and QC literature. By seeing QC literature as “endgame” in terms of containing accurate depiction of LGBTQ+ identities, both alone and alongside each other in communities, one can compare the acceptance in literature with that which exists in our society. By keeping queer YA literature in the hands of young adults, and on the curriculum of students, one is actively holding our society by the standards of acceptance and tolerance for anyone. By depicting accurate bisexual identities in literature, young adults can create a better connection and understanding to both bisexual, but also other LGBTQ+ identities. We may still have a long way to go before the bisexual identity is accepted at the same level as the straight, gay, and lesbian identity, but we can clearly see that we are going in the right direction. It may seem like we are all “bi” ourselves for now, but it is evident by the topics discussed in this thesis that we may soon find ourselves at the same level of representation, acceptance and tolerance of which more normalized sexualities are.

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Appendix: The pedagogical relevance of this thesis

One of the core elements of the Norwegian core curriculum in the subject English is “working with texts in English”, where the students are supposed to “develop intercultural competence enabling them to deal with different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns. They shall build the foundation for seeing their own identity and others’ identities in a multilingual and multicultural context” (NDET). By working on the basic skill that is reading, students will be able to develop this intercultural competence, which seems to become more and more important as our society is working towards becoming more accepting of different sexual and gender identities.

LK20 states that “English is an important subject when it comes to cultural understanding, communication, all-round education and identity development” (NDET). Introducing, among other things, different LGBTQ+ identities into the Norwegian school is then an important aspect of the teacher’s job. As a queer teacher myself, I have found that many of my students appreciate my alliance with the LGBTQ+ community and have come to me on several occasions with questions regarding sexual identities, both their own but also in general.

It is not enough however, to only talk about sexuality and genders in class related to literature, it is also important to keep this openness and acceptance outside of the classroom. Some of my students are luckily extremely accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, some even a part of the LGBTQ+ community themselves, but there are also those students who are openly against the LGBTQ+ community and the many identities they incorporate. By trying to position my students as allies rather than homophobes from the start, some of my students have throughout their three years at lower secondary school, moved into being more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community. Not only have we read books like *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli and watched the movie adaption *Love, Simon*, but we teachers also talk about and discuss LGBTQ+ identities outside of class. As a bisexual teacher, some of my students have had a difficult time to acknowledge that I can like both my own gender and other and have at times either labeled me as lesbian or straight. Some have, after some time, come around and started to understand bisexuality better, and accepted it more, which in turn creates a safer environment for my bisexual students as well, all thanks to incorporating more diverse identities in the curriculum as well as having open-minded teachers always advocating for these diverse identities.

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