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ENGL 112B

December 8, 2020

LGBT Representation in Contemporary Fiction

Queer fiction is important for a multitude of reasons, but most important reason is because it allows representation. It gives people a new way to see themselves represented in media, and in a positive light; television and films are not the best or even well done. This poses the following question: is it enough to have representation if it’s misinformed, or is that worse than nothing at all? People consume media as a way to escape real life, and the realities of their day to day life. This is why it’s so vital to have representation, and positive representation in the media, in literature, no mature the extent – while intent is good, the outcome is more important and there needs to be an evaluation as to how it is being preserved and analyzed. The value of having visible representation is invaluable when growing up.

The struggle of discovering self-realization and acceptance of self is vital, and by providing literature where they can see someone they can relate too, it enforces the concept and reality that it is okay. Teenagers don’t need only books that focus on coming of age, or cheesy romance novels; while fun, important, and enjoyable, it’s the normalization of queer characters that’s important. By normalizing it, it helps destigmatize what it means to be queer and begins the conversation that is navigating homophobia. Young queer kids deserve to see themselves have love stories that are just as romantic and expressive as straight people do; there is more to their story than “coming out” and they deserve to see representation that isn’t the same story told three hundred times.

1. McQuinston, Casey. *Red, White & Royal Blue*. St. Martin’s Griffin, 2019. (Newly Read)
   1. Summary: Alex is the son of the First Female President of the United States – and he can’t stand the Prince of England, Henry. After an unfortunate mishap, Alex and Henry are forced to appear as friends to the public to alleviate tensions between the two nations. As Alex and Henry get closer, they have to navigate both their own feelings and the impact their relationship can have.
   2. Evaluation: This novel is the best example of what I’m trying to talk about – there should be cheesy, sappy romantic comedies for queer kids to read. It explores concepts of identifying sexuality and navigating first romances, and also touches on the struggle of what it means to be gay and how it’s not “appropriate” and the guilt or “shame” that is felt as a result. In addition, it touches on the result of being outed and managing homophobia. The Exeter quality that is best seen in this novel is number 6, as it talks about politics and global issues quite frequently and touches briefly on the impact that culture has on sexuality.
2. Albertalli, Becky. *Simon vs. The Homosapiens Agenda*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2015. (Newly Read)
   1. Summary: Simon is your average, normal teenage boy – except he has one secret, and the secret is that he’s gay. Simon must navigate his own feelings and emotions related to coming out and being okay with his identity, emailing his crush, Blue, and preventing himself from being outed by Martin.
   2. Evaluation: This is the classic coming of age novel that is expected when LGBT literature is mentioned. Coming out is a large part of how this genre is depicted as, and while it’s important, it’s not the only facet available. It continues to explain the frustration that only gay people have to come out because the default is straight and the implicit bias that is felt as a result. It focuses on outing and the lack of control that it has, and truly emphasizes the importance of choice and acceptance. This novel is best addressed with is the 4th Exeter quality, because the concept of coming out and being outed are important for young readers to expose themselves to.
3. Riordan, Rick. *The House of Hades*. Hyperion Books, 2013. (Previously Read)
   1. Summary: Set in the modern day, Riordan creates a fantastical world that incorporates elements of Greek and Roman mythology into the character’s lives. The fourth novel of his sequel series, *The House of Hades* focuses on Percy and Annabeth as they try to get out of Tartarus, as well enforcing what it means to create long lasting friendships and what it means to find yourself.
   2. Evaluation: This novel is important to include in this list because it’s not marketed as a “queer” novel but includes queer characters. Long term readers are able to feel validated and accepted in this and it works to normalize these characters in literature, and additionally functions in a way that eliminates the act of “actively looking” for an LGBT novel. Even though it’s not technically a contemporary novel, it holds value in what it’s able to do for LGBT literature, and Riordan has been able to continue to make his work even more diverse and inclusive.
4. Ukazu, Ngozi*. Check, Please!*. First Second, 2018. (Newly Read)
   1. Summary: Eric Bittle is a freshman at Samwell University, bright-eyed and excited to join the hockey team. moving from small town Georgia to liberal Massachusetts, the novel centers around Bitty’s journey in being comfortable with who he is, and the bravery that comes with being yourself.
   2. Evaluation: Uzaku’s primary focus is on the nuance of breaking stereotypes and explaining how damaging they can be. It’s an important read because it highlights the concept of self-acceptance, and that it’s okay for people to fit a stereotype; that it’s not inherently damaging and what it means to grow from your own biases and internalized homophobia. The Exeter quality best expressed in this work is the 4th, because it highlights how multifaceted coming out is, and how different the experiences can be between multiple people.
5. Konigsberg, Bill. *Openly Straight*. Scholastic Inc., 2013. (Newly Read)
   1. Summary: Rafe is tired of being the stereotypical “gay kid” so when he moves into his college dorm, he chooses to go back into the closet – he wants to be seen as himself, and eliminate any preconceived notion about him because of his sexuality. Rafe navigates being closeted and falling in love with a Ben, and it highlights the nuance of what it means to like someone else.
   2. Evaluation: This novel follows the similar concept of feeing the frustration with the need to come out. it plays a part in the need of having a label – are they necessary in the first place – but also what it means to discover your own identity. It’s primarily on self-realization and growth and the nuance of internalized homophobia, and these concepts are invaluable to young readers. The Exeter quality that best fits the novel is the 7th – Rafe has to navigate his own internalized biases, and he is an inherently flawed narrator, so it provides insight on internalized homophobia without ever explicitly calling it out by name.
6. Silvera, Adam. *They Both Die at the End*. Quill Tree Books, 2017. (Newly Read)
   1. Summary: Silvera creates a novel that while contemporary, contains elements of science fiction, which adds depth to this list of fiction. In a universe where people are given an End Day, Mateo and Rufus - both complete strangers - connect and chose to live their last day to it’s fullest.
   2. Evaluation: This novel is important because it highlights not just the concept of self-discovery that is so vital to queer coming of age literature, but additionally asks the question of what it truly means to live. Is it possible to fall in love in one day? Is it possible to be yourself without consequence? It forces teens to discover what it means to die, and the challenges between the stigmas of death in different cultures. The Exeter quality that this novel exemplifies is the 6th, as it focuses on not only the diversity of being LGBT, but of being from a minority culture.
7. Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe.* Simon & Schuster Books, 2012. (Newly Read)
   1. Summary: Aristotle and Dante are an unlikely pair – they come from completely different backgrounds, and only met by chance. But as the duo spend more time together, they realize that there’s more to themselves than they originally expected.
   2. Evaluation: This is another classic coming of age novel, that puts much of its emphasis on self and navigating the age-old question of determining what it means to be comfortable with yourself and the current path. It’s extends with the question of it being okay to not know, and this message is important in queer literature because of the weight that it holds. The Exeter quality this novel had most preveniently was the 5th, as evidenced by the style and control Sáenz was able to invoke.
8. Oseman, Alice. *Heartstopper.* Self-Published, 2018. (Newly Read)
   1. Summary: Set in a boarding school, Charlie and Nick are assigned seats at the start of the semester. As their relationship gets closer, their feelings get more intense, and the novel poses the question of when is it right to come out, and how long are you allowed to stay in the closet.
   2. Evaluation: This is another work that centers on romance and self-discovery. It’s important to include because it provides another look at the “friends to lovers” trope, while also navigating the notion of being gay and how to chose to come out. While being primarily a romance, it’s relevant because shows the characters navigating their own societal pressures and grapple with what it means to be gay. The Exeter quality utilized is the 4th, because of the coming out narratives.
9. Bellefleur, Alexandria. *Written in the Stars*. Avon, 2020. (Newly Read)
   1. Summary: After a blind date misunderstanding, Darcy and Elle decide to make the decision to “fake date” to save themselves from the embarrassment of having to be set up for another time. The problem: Darcy and Elle are complete and total opposites – will they be able to keep up the story, or will it turn into something more?
   2. Evaluation: This novel was incredibly comforting, and easy to read. A more modern day take on Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen, Darcy and Elle have to navigate their own feelings and biases and come to terms with how they actually feel. This novel is included because it’s an easy, enjoyable read, and it still focuses on the central question of identity and being yourself. The Exeter quality most evident is the 1st, as the plotline is inventive and fresh to read.
10. Power, Rory. *Wilder Girls*. Macmillan Children's Books, 2020. (Newly Read)
    1. Summary: Hetty has been in quarantine for 18 months – the Tox has gotten worse, and she and her friends but struggle to survive when the symptoms get worse. Hetty’s character is challenged when her friend Byatt goes missing, and she must work together to rescue her and uncover the truths of the island.
    2. Evaluation: This work is interesting to include because it’s not about romance – it’s about friendship and solving the mystery but it’s important to have nuance in queer literature. Teens don’t always need a sappy love story to get representation – the valuable part is that there is good, valuable representation. Hetty likes girls, she likes Reese, and this relationship is treated as an almost non-issue (which eliminates the need for a coming out narrative, which is the most common type of story). This further normalizes the concept of representation and seeing it be okay for girls to love other girls. The Exeter qualities this novel include are two, three, and four, because it not only focuses on a quarantined state, the female characters are complex, diverse, and strong in their own way.

Works Cited

Donelson, Kenneth L., and Alleen Pace Nilsen. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, 8th ed., Pearson, 2008.