

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 3

January 2020

Reimagining Queer Death in Young Adult Fiction

Katelyn R. Browne

University of Northern Iowa, katelyn.browne@uni.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl>

Recommended Citation

Browne, Katelyn R. (2020) "Reimagining Queer Death in Young Adult Fiction," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol2/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SOPHIA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research on Diversity in Youth Literature by an authorized editor of SOPHIA. For more information, please contact amshaw@stkate.edu.

“I’m queer, which is why I always thought I’d be dead by now,” opens Sarah Gailey’s essay about their unthinking reproduction of queer misery in their own writing. Similarly, in 2009, William Banks summarized the state of fictional queer adolescence in the eighties and early nineties with a devastating sentence: “LGBT characters are most useful if they’re dead or gone” (35). Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart find an even starker sentiment in their analysis of Isabelle Holland’s novel *The Man Without a Face*, whose plot suggests that “the only good homosexual is a dead homosexual” (22).

Queer¹ characters in young adult (YA) fiction² have been closely connected with death since their earliest appearances. John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, published in 1969, is commonly treated as the first gay YA novel for its presentation of an adolescent crush and kiss between protagonist Davy and his close friend Altschuler. At the very moment Davy is confronted by his father about his experiences with Altschuler, Davy’s beloved dog Fred is run over by a car. This moment, evidence that “death was an appropriate punishment for expressing same-sex desire” (Kokkola 92), can be seen to enforce a “close—even causal—

¹ I use “queer” here as an inclusive blanket term for all sexual and gender minority identities. This use overlaps with, but is distinct from, my use of “queer” in the queer-theory sense of the active and radical rejection of normativity. When context is not sufficient, I have tried to be clear about which meaning I intend in a given sentence.

As I discuss readers of YA novels, I try to distinguish between “queer-identifying readers,” who read with an awareness of their own queer identity; “queer readers,” who also include readers who may not yet be aware of their own queerness; and “outside readers,” who come to queer texts with the assumption that queer people are *other* than they are. These groups, of course, overlap.

The books discussed in this article primarily include gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters because they are by far the most prevalent sexual/gender minority characters in young adult fiction to date, and because the symbology of death in trans literature carries additional meanings and weights—for example, the cultural equation of transition with an almost literal death—that deserve a focused study of their own. While this article does, to a certain extent, reproduce YA literature’s overrepresentation of GLB experiences, I try to separate analyses specific to gay, lesbian, and/or bisexual identities from broader analyses of queerness at work.

² As a librarian, I am primarily interested in young adult literature as it is experienced by its intended readers. I use “YA fiction” and “adolescent literature” as interchangeable terms to describe books published for the YA market.

connection... between homosexuality and death” (Jenkins and Cart 14-15) that has persisted for decades.

The idea that queer characters are predestined to die is a pernicious one. The “Bury Your Gays” trope has been specifically called out and condemned by GLAAD following a particularly brutal year for lesbian and bisexual women television characters in 2016 (Townsend). Evidence that sexual/gender minority youth deal with an increased risk of suicide has prompted dozens of real-world hotlines, conversation guidelines, and outreach projects focused on the survival of queer and questioning teens. Recommendations from major LGBT+ organizations include specific admonitions against presenting suicide “as the logical consequence of the kinds of bullying, rejection, discrimination, and exclusion that LGBT people often experience” (GLAAD et al. 3).

Yet death, grief, and survival play crucial roles in the developmental work done by adolescent literature. Isolating queer YA fiction from death would be dishonest; what is to be done?

In this article, I investigate the connections between death, queerness, and adolescence in YA fiction. I then examine novels that tokenize queer death for heterosexual characters’ growth as well as novels that focus instead on the grief of queer protagonists. I discuss the different ideological ground these novels occupy and argue that, while tokenized death imposes significant limits on the queer reader, novels that center queer characters’ grief fundamentally differ in their understanding of adolescence, its developmental work, and its inherent queerness. By exploring queer grief, these novels blur the lines between “queer” adolescence and regulated, “successful” adulthood, challenging the idea that queer teens can best fulfill their narrative purpose by dying.

Death and (Queer) Sexuality in Young Adult Literature

Roberta Seelinger Trites identifies three dominant discourses in YA fiction: separating one's identity from one's parents; exploring sexuality; and engaging with death (122). Given this triad of developmental work, the ongoing connection between queerness and death seems unsurprising. Indeed, theoretical explorations of both death and queerness in adolescent literature illuminate the cultural understandings that make queer death feel inevitable and logical in YA novels: queerness and adolescence are intrinsically linked, while queerness is perceived as being incompatible with adulthood; the work of adolescence requires bringing about its own end; and queer characters gain utility in death in ways that are seen to further this developmental work. As visible queer adulthood becomes more culturally viable, however, the inevitability of queer teen death comes into question, making room for YA fiction to engage more expansively with the role of death in the lives of queer adolescents.

In the cultural imagination, adolescence is an inherently unstable state; Lydia Kokkola describes it as a “period of carnival when the normal rules of human behaviour[...] are suspended” (2). Gabrielle Owen links this instability with an inherent queerness, defining adolescence largely by its position outside the strictures of adulthood, “conceptualized as unstable, as transitional, as a time when heterosexuality is practiced but not yet achieved” (113). While Owen's discussion of queerness is rooted in the expansive queerness of queer theory—“a richness and complexity of experience that exist in excess of language, in the profound failure of language to *be* the material world and our experiences of it” (114)—the liminal, unstable characteristics she describes are also those we have historically ascribed to homosexuality in its most concrete and lived forms. Looking at professional reviews of *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip*, Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart note the tacit agreement among reviewers

that when an adolescent boy kisses his male best friend, it must be “a routine rite of passage[...] which is to suggest, of course, that homosexuality is both unnatural and transient” (13). In other words: don’t worry, it’s just a phase, you’ll grow out of it.

This understanding of adolescence as fundamentally transitional means that the developmental work of adolescence requires leaving it behind. As Trites explains, in adolescent literature, adult writers show adolescent characters testing their own power, finding its limits, and being socialized into their proper places in society and its institutions (54). Productive identity work can include queer, destabilizing experiences (including actual engagement with queer sex), but the adolescent must eventually abandon that instability for a socially stable adult life. Death becomes a necessary instrument in this stabilizing project; Kathryn James identifies a cultural reliance on fictional death “to establish conformity of the populace” (27), particularly where women are concerned. In young adult fiction, death can also be invoked “to illustrate the complete failure of the subject to assert their agency and thus fulfill the desire to create an identity” (Wilson, quoted in James 65). Adolescence, then, has two natural ends: successful, heteronormative adulthood, or the grave.

However, even for the “successful” adolescent, death remains a useful plot point to spur developmental work. Unlike in children’s literature, where death serves thematically as part of the parent-child separation process (Trites 118), death in adolescent literature functions as its own discourse with its own important functions. Death can initiate or intensify an adolescent identity crisis (James 127); the discourse around death allows the adolescent reader to accept their own mortality (Trites 119); and death and other traumas can be used “to threaten [children and young adults] into subjection, and to show them the unpleasant realities of life and the consequences of defying the rules and norms of American culture” (Tribunella xxiii).

Longstanding cultural understandings of gay men and lesbians make them feel like natural choices for this boundary-policing, maturity-enabling death. James cites Jonathan Dollimore's work on the link between homosexual men and death, "often imagined to include both suicidal and murderous impulses in which homosexuals court death, contract the AIDS virus, and then knowing of their impending death, willingly infect others through sexual contact" (16). This assumption of malice has lingered for a generation: while brothers and uncles with HIV/AIDS were frequent secondary characters in YA fiction for the decade between 1986 and 1996,³ the intentional spread of HIV shows up as late as Brian Farrey's *With or Without You*, published in 2011. In contrast, the gauzy invisibility of lesbian desire has long nurtured a literary connection between lesbians and ghosts (Kokkola 122-123), which continues to atmospherically haunt novels like Robin Talley's *As I Descended* (2016) and Emma Berquist's *Missing, Presumed Dead* (2019). In both cases, claiming a gay or lesbian identity is synonymous with choosing death through the logic Sara Ahmed calls queer fatalism, "the assumption that to be queer is to hurtle toward a miserable fate" ("Queer Fatalism").

Even arguments in queer theory that focus on adult lives can unimagine the jump from adolescence to queer adulthood; Lee Edelman's rejection of the mythologized child of the heteronormative imagination kicked off a world of futurity that has a tendency to leave actually-queer kids and teens far behind (Hurley 121; Owen 122-123). José Esteban Muñoz pushes at this tendency as he names the "crypto-universal white gay subject" of many queer theories, simultaneously asserting that "racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity" (363). Adolescent fiction has the potential to flesh out the lived experiences of these

³ 1986 marked the publication of M.E. Kerr's *Night Kites*; in the ensuing decade, Cart and Jenkins note at least thirteen subsequent books with AIDS plots. Typical of this trend are the valorizing titles *When Heroes Die* (Penny Raife Durant, 1992), about an uncle with AIDS; *Real Heroes* (Marilyn Kaye, 1993), about a teacher with AIDS; and *My Brother Has AIDS* (Deborah Davis, 1994).

kids, who are marked from childhood as being outside the smothering protection of the heteronormative future. However, when queer characters are killed off in droves, queerness is reinforced as a cultural threat, “bringing children and childhood to an end” (Edelman 25).

Meanwhile, in the more commercial genre of teen “sick-lit,” the deaths of noncompliant side characters, embodying sickness and/or queerness, become developmental fuel for surviving protagonists. As Julie Passanante Elman observes, by the internal logic of sick-lit, “the rehabilitative power of compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness requires the concomitant disciplining (or death) of queer/crip alternatives” (187). James draws a similar connection between the deaths of queer characters and the deaths of fictional women, both of which are enacted “to remove destructive forces from the masculine economy” (84), ensuring that heteronormative and patriarchal power flourish.

And in queer YA fiction specifically, Jenkins and Cart note two recurring, troubling issues even with novels that strive to be affirming: “the sanctification of homosexuals and the corollary demonization of homophobes” and “the cause-and-effect relationship between homosexuality and physical violence—even death” (29). While these themes appear to be at odds with one another, they are in fact mutually reinforcing: religious notions of sainthood are frequently attached to either literal death or a symbolic overcoming of the mortal, imperfect self. Whether perfect or dead (or both), the queer characters in these novels are held to troublingly rigid standards that imbue queer identities with an otherworldliness, separating them somehow from the mere non-queer mortals.

For outside readers, a queer character serves as a useful developmental surrogate, the epitome of frantic, fumbling, uncertain adolescence. With the death of an actual, incurable queer character, the outside reader is reassured and restored to stability: their own symbolic queerness

is laid to rest as they prepare for adulthood, and their grief, while unsettling, is temporary and yields to productive, melancholic stability.

For queer-identified readers, however, the vicarious death of a queer character foreshadows a more ominous future, whether literal or symbolic. Like the adult gay men discussed above, presumed to be walking AIDS vectors, queer teens have long been culturally *expected* to die: from AIDS; from homophobic violence; from suicide. For the queer teen who survives in body, coming out as queer is presumed to lead to social death—even affirming novels come packaged with indications to queer teens that “they will probably suffer from immense angst and may well be rejected by those who are most dear to them” (Kokkola 109). Strife and suffering are presumed to be inherent to queer identity development (98), as in Ahmed’s metaphor of heterosexuality as a “path that is kept clear,” maintained by frequent use and support systems, while “perpetual reminders of how hard something would be” continue the work of making any deviation from that path hard (“Queer Use”).

Just as adolescence is inherently queer, queerness is framed as inherently adolescent. Developing into a healthy, productive queer adult has been presumed to be a contradiction in terms, and therefore outside the developmental scope of adolescent fiction. Jenkins and Cart highlight the pernicious subtext of YA novels that include queer characters without presenting any sense of a broader queer community. In these books, “the point is made that the closet is the price that the gay/lesbian character must pay in order to belong—and continue to belong—to his or her community of friends and family of origin” (31). To be queer is to be trapped in an eternal adolescence, unable to participate fully in the broader adult and familial world.

This subtext is not limited to novels with only one or two queer teen characters. Take, for instance, the longtime perceived high-water mark of affirming lesbian YA fiction, *Annie on My*

Mind. Nancy Garden's novel is notable for presenting lesbians from multiple generations, all of whom are happy in love and none of whom die—and yet Liza's teachers have only maintained successful careers because their relationship and their orientations are absolutely secret. Queer community, communicated through bookshelves and sleeping arrangements, only exists safely behind the closed doors of their home.

As queer adulthood and queer community become more visible in public life, depictions of queer adolescent life and death find room to become more complex. Queer-identified readers do not necessarily need to be reminded of their own mortality, which Trites proposes as the central focus of the death discourse in YA fiction (119). The inevitability of queer death has already pervaded this culture, as television critic Heather Hogan explains: "This is not a twist: it is only surprising how awfully familiar it is. We feel this in our bones... What does it say when so many lesbian storylines end in tragedy? When the theme here is that lesbians must die to move a story forward. It has been cultivated in us for decades." If queerness, as Muñoz argues, "should and can be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough" (365), adolescent fiction offers a fascinating site for that desire as both characters and readers work through mortality and the idea of impending adulthood. As authors of YA fiction reckon with queer-identified readers as a possible or even primary audience, their treatment of death can expand to include queer characters as surviving *subjects* of death narratives, rather than the sanctified and deceased *objects* upon whose graves developmental work is performed.

The figure of the dead queer object has not vanished from YA fiction. I will describe some of its recent incarnations before exploring three texts that present queer characters as active subjects, performing developmental work through grief that strengthens and reinscribes their

queerness, leading them into an adult queer identity. These texts were chosen because they complicate three longstanding sites of queer engagement with death: murder; death in the family; and suicide.

Hate Crimes and the Token Dead Gay

Sacrificing queer characters on the altar of nonqueer characters' development continues as always in young adult literature. In the early 2010s, a spate of books revisited a particularly disturbing means of killing off gay side characters. Lauren Myracle's *Shine* (2011) follows sixteen-year-old Cat, a nonqueer character, as she tries to solve a hate crime. The book opens with a newspaper clipping, describing her best friend Patrick's attempted murder in grisly detail: he had been badly beaten and was found "slumped on the pavement, bound to the guardrail of the fuel dispenser. The gasoline nozzle protruded from his mouth, held in place with duct tape. Across the teen's bare chest, scrawled in blood, were the words *Suck this, faggot*" (1). Patrick survives this attack, but he spends the entire book unconscious as Cat and her friends track down the perpetrator—who is, of course, gay himself, acting out of internalized homophobia. Patrick wakes up in the novel's final chapter; functionally, he has been utterly removed from the narrative and deprived of any agency as a character.

Certainly heterosexual, cisgender characters also die in young adult literature, even as little more than plot devices. Patrick's brutal attack must be contextualized, however: a list compiled by Michael Cart and Malinda Lo shows only 25 young adult books with any significant LGBTQ content published by traditional publishers in 2011. *Shine* is not the only one with a significant focus on homophobic violence—for example, the list also includes Paul Volponi's

Crossing Lines, a star-crossed romance that includes a queerbashing plotline, and Nancy Belgue's *Soames on the Range*, whose protagonist is attacked because his *father* is gay.

A remarkably similar hate crime occurs in Andrew Smith's *Winger*, published in 2013.⁴ *Winger* is primarily a raunchy boarding-school story revolving around fourteen-year-old Ryan Dean West's quest to fit in and get a girlfriend. Joey Cosentino, the gay rugby team captain, provides a supportive older presence and helps Ryan Dean figure out life.

After 400 pages of hijinks and wisdom, however, Ryan Dean has grown up and Joey's presence is no longer necessary—so he's literally taken out back and killed. Nine pages from the end of the book, after Joey has been missing for a few chapters, Ryan Dean reveals that Joey has been found “in the woods... tied to a tree, stripped naked, and had been beaten to death” (429). Ryan Dean is devastated, but his ability to vocalize and process his grief serves as the novel's final signifier that he has matured from anxious pubescent to stabilizing young adult. Readers also learn that Joey's killers included a classmate whose secret homosexuality Joey had discovered.

Where do these humiliating and remarkably similar attacks come from? A hint may lie in history and in a third book from this period, Lesléa Newman's *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*, published in 2012. Newman's poem series was explicitly written to memorialize Matthew Shepard, who, in 1998, at age twenty-one, was murdered outside Laramie, Wyoming. Shepard, too, was beaten (with a pistol), tied up (to a fence), and left to die, “his face streaked with moonlight and blood” (16). In her introduction and again in her afterword, Newman explains to (presumed teen) readers that she had been at the University of Wyoming shortly after Shepard's murder—she was the keynote speaker for Gay Awareness Week (90), an

⁴ In 2013, Malinda Lo counted 29 LGBT YA novels from mainstream publishers, hardly a change from 2011; *Winger* was not included in this count, likely because its main character is straight and cisgender.

event Shepard had helped plan (x). The poems are careful and poignant, and it is clear that Newman has been haunted by these events for over a decade.

Generationally, Miracle, Newman, and Smith are the adults and near-peers who watched as their world failed '90s teens like Matthew Shepard (born in late 1976)—of course their writing should continue to process this milestone in the treatment of anti-gay hate crimes. The continued memorialization of Shepard, including the naming and passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, does mark an ongoing transition from homosexuality's enforced criminality (and assumed moral repugnance) to an ethos of toleration and acceptance. For an audience who was just being born around the time of Shepard's death, Newman's memorial-in-verse provides human context for this legal and social sea change. *Shine* and *Winger*, however, are set in the present day of the early 2010s. To continuously, mimetically reproduce the idea that all gay people will either commit a homophobic assault (if they're self-loathing and bad) or end up lashed to a post, stripped and beaten (if they're self-aware and good), is inaccurate and dangerous even as queer teens have legitimate reason to continue to fear violence and discrimination.

Murder, Homophobia, and Heteronormativity

The murder of queer people, particularly in bias-motivated crimes, is a perennial plot twist in young adult fiction. Occasionally, these murders are murder-suicides, as in Jack Gantos's *Desire Lines* (1997). The mysterious death of a local LGB or queer-coded person has also served as an inciting event for nonqueer characters' growth and development, as in Bette Greene's *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* (1991), Carol Plum-Ucci's *The Death of Lani Garver* (2002), James Lecesne's *Absolute Brightness* (2008), and Ilsa J. Bick's *The Sin-Eater's Confession* (2014).

Murder novels have close cousins in books whose gay characters die in automobile/motorcycle accidents (a trope dating back to Sandra Scoppettone's *Trying Hard to Hear You* (1973)) and books whose characters survive sexual assaults (which dates back to another Scoppettone novel, 1978's *Happy Endings Are All Alike*).

Far from You, Tess Sharpe's 2014 debut novel, continues the tradition of the dead queer catalyst character. The book's narrator, Sophie, starts the first chapter by describing the two times she has almost died: once in a car accident with her best friend Mina and Mina's brother Trev, and once the night Mina was murdered. In the bifurcated story that follows (chapters alternate between a linear post-murder narrative and scattered what-happened-before snapshots), Sophie sets out to find Mina's murderer, clear her own name, and process her overwhelming grief.

In light of Elman's dual positioning of disability and queerness as irreconcilably adolescent, in need of either death or cure, Sophie is a fascinating protagonist. The near-fatal car accident left her with permanent physical disabilities; she manages chronic pain and uses a cane. In addition, she is in recovery (and, in flashbacks, active addiction) after developing an addiction to pain medication. While Mina actively dated boys to cover up her homosexuality and feared coming out to her Catholic family and community, Sophie is comfortable in her bisexuality even as she discusses the fullness of her relationship with Mina for the first time with a friend. Verbally coming out also serves as an immense emotional release for Sophie: "It makes me laugh, the sound bursting out of me like truth. It makes me want to cry and thank her. To tell her that I've never told anyone before, and to tell it and have it be accepted like it's no big deal feels like a gift" (124).

Far from You can be read as part of a recent microtrend in which LGB teens process the sudden, tragic deaths of their romantic partners.⁵ As a trend, these novels offer the worrisome suggestion that queer death in YA isn't gone; it's simply shifted from being a punishment for *being* gay into a punishment for rejecting celibacy and indulging in queer love.

Notably, Sharpe blends this emphasis on queer romantic grief with the longstanding tradition of the gay-murder novel. However, Sophie's story upends the conventional logic of decades of murder books in which a homophobic character, probably repressing their own homosexuality, kills the more self-actualized gay character—Mina's death actually has nothing to do with her sexual orientation. Well-worn tropes do echo: Mina's hidden homosexuality is still narratively incompatible with maturity and adulthood, and Sophie is able to come out to her friends and family *because* her closeted paramour has died. But something powerful works beneath the surface—here, the author kills the character who was willing to comply with heteronormative expectations and sets up a healthy adulthood for a bisexual, disabled, well-therapized, forever-in-recovery woman who will never outgrow any of those unruly “adolescent” attributes.

Death In/Of The Family

Traditionally, the function of the queer character in young adult literature is to die. These novels tended to be narrated in first person (communicating an immediate familiarity with the adolescent reader) by a nonqueer character who could sketch the outlines of the queer character's story, engender a proper amount of sympathy for the inevitable death, and process immense but

⁵ Other titles in this vein include Elizabeth Hand's *Radiant Days* (2012), Julie Anne Peters's *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me* (2014), Shaun David Hutchinson's *We Are the Ants* (2016), Adam Silvera's *History Is All You Left Me* (2017), A.B. Rutledge's *Miles Away from You* (2018), and Jaye Robin Brown's *The Meaning of Birds* (2019).

ultimately transient grief for/with the reader. Deaths in the family can feel particularly complex and immediate, as in M.E. Kerr's *Night Kites* (1986) and the other dozen AIDS-in-the-family novels that followed, as well as books like E.M. Kokie's *Personal Effects* (2012), which deals with the aftermath of a brother's death in the military.

A simple but significant way to preserve the intimate grief of the family death story while centering queer experiences (and allowing queer characters to survive) can be seen in novels such as Nina LaCour's *We Are Okay* (2017), narrated by bereft college student Marin. In a spare, emotionally rich telling, Marin works through the aftermath of a thwarted romantic relationship with her best friend, Mabel, as she processes her grief over her grandfather's recent death and her mother's much earlier passing.

Marin's grandfather, who served as her functional parent for over a decade after Marin's mother died, dies during the summer before she leaves for university—a time when, already, their habits are shifting, “as though Gramps and I were practicing for our near futures without each other” (150). By moving across the country and severing communication with her friends in California, Marin has sought to abjectly distance herself from the blithe security of youth. Because her grandfather's death so thoroughly rearranged her world, Marin projects the stable happiness of childhood even onto her high school years, when “we were so innocent and we didn't even know it. There's no way of getting it back. The confidence. The easy laughter. The sensation of having left home only for a little while. Of having a home to return to” (128). Mabel's eventual arrival, which brings the reality of California into Marin's New York life, forces both young women to process their once-fledgling sexual relationship as well as Marin's immense grief. Eventually, Marin becomes able to express a typically adult sensibility about the universal discomfort of sadness and ambiguity: “I guess it's where we live most of the time. I

guess it's where we *all* live, so maybe it doesn't have to be so lonely. Maybe I can settle into it, cozy up to it, make a home inside uncertainty" (228). No longer does she cling to an adolescent perception of herself as the only sad person in the world.

Positioning a queer protagonist as the *processor* of grief rather than the *source* of grief transforms the reading experience beyond a mere levelling of numbers. Marin's grief, combined with mourning any romantic possibilities with Mabel, allows her to access an adulthood where she feels secure in her sexual orientation and begins to consider the possibility of falling in love with a new woman (225). Rather than using grief as a way to contain and escape queerness, the productive experience of grieving *enshrines* Marin's identity, making it clear that her romantic and sexual interest in women was not a teenage phase or single-target affection. Queerness is thus aligned with one possible productive adulthood, blazing a trail for Marin and for the readers who have been inside her head.

Suicide and Patricide

A similar absolute adult commitment to queerness, though with a less hopeful ending, finds a thematic throughline in Adam Silvera's *More Happy Than Not*, published in 2015. On sight, *More Happy* appears to be a novel about suicide—a death that has appeared in queer young adult literature for decades as a seemingly-natural alternative for the queer youth who can't stumble their way into a hate crime, or the questioning teen who cannot resolve their orientational confusion in life. Many suicidal characters survive their attempts—a plot twist that dates back to Stephanie S. Tolan's *The Last of Eden* (1980)—but completed suicides featured heavily around the turn of the millennium in novels such as William Taylor's *Jerome* (1999), Elaine Marie Alphin's *Simon Says* (2002), and Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim* (2008).

Silvera's protagonist, Aaron Soto, functionally attempts suicide three times: once by slitting his wrists, and twice by pursuing a treatment known as "the Leteo procedure," which promises to completely erase one memory from a patient's brain. Aaron's circle of friends is openly homophobic, and his father reacted to Aaron's coming out by physically assaulting him. Erasing his homosexuality—in death or via Leteo—seems necessary. This understanding of the procedure is established clearly in the text as Aaron narrates, "We're going to kill that part of me that's ruined everything. I'm going to be straight, just like how my father would've wanted" (205).

None of these attempts are successful, and their aftermath is tragic: ominous warnings about Leteo pay off as Aaron discovers that he's experiencing severe memory loss and will likely forget significant portions of his life. But even devastating amnesia won't undo Aaron's homosexuality—he will still remember "Before," the childhood in which he knew he was different and the early adolescence he spent in a covert romance with a friend. By the established logic of adolescent fiction, Aaron seems doomed to die—and as a working-class, queer, Latinx teen, he has never been the mythical child futurity seeks to protect (Muñoz 363). But while YA suicide novels have historically removed the homosexual character from any possible future and reinscribed the idea that homosexuality is fundamentally incompatible with adulthood, *More Happy* does the opposite: Silvera sends Aaron into adulthood with *only* his homosexuality, the most unkillable thing about him.

Meanwhile, Aaron is grieving his father, who recently died by suicide. Aaron's father is one of many dead nonqueer characters in the novel—Aaron's friend Kenneth has recently been murdered; his girlfriend Genevieve's mother was killed in a plane crash; Aaron's grandparents have died somewhat recently; Aaron even mentions offhand that "in every generation on my

block, a group of friends loses someone” (86). But Aaron’s father’s death is the freshest, and it is the death most closely connected to Aaron’s homosexuality. After Aaron came out, his father warned him that “I’ll be damned if I’m alive the day you bring a boy home, you fucking faggot” (191). This threat fuels Aaron’s ongoing belief that he is responsible for his father’s suicide, which occurred on a day when Aaron was out with (and getting gaybashed with) Collin, his secret inamorato.

Homosexuality-as-patricide is not unprecedented in young adult literature. In Scott Bunn’s *Just Hold On* (1982), protagonist Stephen’s father dies of a heart attack just as Stephen has sex with another boy for the first time. More recently, in emily m. danforth’s *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012), the eponymous Cameron shares her first homoromantic kiss in the same moment her parents die in a car accident. These deaths offer a startling, permanent literalization of the common adolescent fear that being queer and/or coming out would destroy any relationship with one’s parents beyond repair—“this would just *kill* my mother.” At the same time, the death of the parent reinforces the cultural impossibility of the queer child—anyone who has made a proactive move toward homosexual attraction is now irrevocably adult, never to be offered parental care again.

Where Bunn’s and danforth’s plots suggest a divine meting out of justice, however, Silvera’s suggests an active choice to reject parenting a queer child. While Aaron blames himself for his father’s death, an alternative understanding of events (even operating within the simplistic adolescent analysis that ignores health conditions like depression, of which suicide can be a manifestation) is that *homophobia* is the proximal symbolic cause of his death. After decades of books whispering to readers that *if you’re queer, you’ll just have to die—even if we like you, it’s*

inevitable, Silvera’s novel flips the messaging around: *if you can’t accept your gay son, you have literally no place in his adult life—and his queerness cannot be killed.*

Imagining the Queer-Centered Grief Novel

LaCour, Sharpe, and Silvera’s novels serve as instructive jumping-off points for a vision of a post-tokenization treatment of death and grief in queer YA fiction. To be sure, there are some commonalities between these books and more tokenizing novels. For example, none of them have prominent queer adult characters; while their protagonists will survive into adulthood, they (and the queer-identified reader by proxy) lack documented contact with any models of actualized queer adulthood. When any sense of queer community is present, it is only among fellow adolescents.

The queer-centered grief novel, if I may invent a subgenre, begins to resist both the heteronormative and the homonormative agendas of the classic “dead queer” novels. In a “dead queer” book, heteronormativity kills or threatens queer characters for the developmental benefit of the nonqueer characters left behind; in the queer-centered grief novel, queer protagonists find opportunities for community and self-understanding as they process their human mortality through survival.

More insidiously, the “dead queer” trope suggests that queerness itself must be killed in the process of outgrowing adolescence. This symbolic destruction of unruly queerness pushes readers to identify with either a nonqueer protagonist or a corpse, reifying homonormativity’s insistence that “good gays” will be acceptable in adulthood as long as “bad queers” are

appropriately stigmatized and excluded (Branfman 8).⁶ In other words, the queer-identified reader might be “allowed” to grow up—as long as they regulate their queerness and emulate the surviving nonqueer protagonists as closely as possible.

A powerful shift, therefore, takes place when authors choose to depict queer characters not (only) as people who die, but as protagonists who survive and negotiate grief. Immediately, all readers are assumed to be able to identify with a queer protagonist, which simultaneously centers the queer-identified reader while asserting a certain universality of the emotional experiences of queer people.

Novels about the grief of queer people also sidestep the longterm task of the “dead queer” novel: negotiating the grievability of queer lives. Discussing Judith Butler’s work on grievable and ungrievable lives, Sara Ahmed argues that queer people’s work is not to become grievable:

To become grievable, to move from being ungrievable to grievable, queers might have to become less queer; signs of queerness might need to be removed before a loss can be publicly shared. When queerness has to disappear, out of politeness at this moment of grief, say in the midst of a family loss, we experience more queer grief (“Queer Fatalism”).

While death in the “dead queer” novel serves as a shocking focal point for nonqueer characters to perform queer acceptance or rejection, death in the queer-centered grief novel is a starting point for a queer adolescent to perform maturation through grieving. If the deceased was also queer, as in *Far from You*, queer grievability, and the particular queer grief of hetero- and homonormative erasure, can still be treated as a significant concern. But rather than arguing about whether or not

⁶ While homonormativity, which seeks inclusion within heteronormativity rather than resistance against it (Duggan 50), may alleviate homophobia in some situations, it encourages continued biphobia and transphobia (Mathers et al. 939), making it a particularly impossible compromise for most queer teens.

queer deaths deserve mourning, the queer-centered grief novel is rooted in an assumption that queer people can also survive.

In both *More Happy Than Not* and *Far from You*, the survival of disability further demonstrates the destabilizing power of queer survival. While a connection between queerness and disability in adolescent fiction is not novel (Elman 177), in the queer-centered novel, they are no longer presented as “epitomes of abnormality,” the lesser versions of heterosexuality and health. The hint of serious cognitive issues at the end of *More Happy Than Not* pushes even harder against a normative, “productive” adulthood: Aaron might be living with his mother for much of his adult life, and his survival remains a victory.

Queer YA has, for its entire existence, wrestled with the tension between depicting the queerphobic world as we know it and offering more optimistic roadmaps to both queer and nonqueer readers.⁷ When centered on queer experiences, grief fiction can cut a useful third path by both acknowledging and moving through immense pain. Metaphorically, too, the heteronormative world is a place of symbolic death, in which a consistent emphasis on assumed heterosexuality pushes an undercurrent of queer erasure (Ahmed, “Queer Use”). As queer characters *experience* death without dying themselves, the impossibility of queer adulthood fades, replaced by an assumption that queer teens can grow up and be, as LaCour’s title announces, okay.

⁷ Examples of the “realistic” queer novel can easily include all of the “dead queer” novels discussed in this article; for classic examples of the “optimistic” queer novel set in worlds without homophobia, see David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* or Malinda Lo’s *Ash*.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. "Queer Fatalism." *feministkilljoys*, 13 January 2017, feministkilljoys.com/2017/01/13/queer-fatalism/.
- . "Queer Use." *feministkilljoys*, 8 November 2018, feministkilljoys.com/2018/11/08/queer-use/.
- Banks, William P. "Literacy, Sexuality, and the Value(s) of Queer Young Adult Literatures." *English Journal*, vol. 98, no. 4, Mar. 2009, pp. 33–36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40503258.
- Branfman, Jonathan. "Failed Fatherhood and the 'Trap of Ambivalence': Assimilation, Homonormativity, and Effeminophobia in *The New Normal*." *Journal of Homosexuality*, 20 Sept. 2018, doi:10.1010/00918369.2018.1510263.
- Cart, Michael, and Malinda Lo. "LGBTQ Young Adult Books, 2009-2011." *Malinda Lo*, static1.squarespace.com/static/58dd71ebbbd1a51648718d8/58ee6c10890b27dbb676fcd8/58ee6c4c890b27dbb6770b4c/1492020300674/LGBTQYA2009to2011.pdf.
- Duggan, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Beacon, 2003.
- Edelman, Lee. "The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive." *Narrative*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1998, pp. 18-30. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20107133.
- Elman, Julie Passante. "'Nothing Feels as Real': Teen Sick-Lit, Sadness, and the Condition of Adolescence." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2012, pp.176-191. *Gale Academic OneFile*, doi:10.3828/jlcds.2012.15.

Gailey, Sarah. "Between the Coats: A Sensitivity Read Changed My Life." *The Book Smugglers*, 12 June 2018, www.thebooksmugglers.com/2018/06/between-the-coats-a-sensitivity-read-changed-my-life-an-essay-by-sarah-gailey.html.

GLAAD et al. "Talking About Suicide & LGBT Populations." *GLSEN*, 2011, www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/Talking%20About%20Suicide%20and%20LGBT%20Populations.pdf.

Hogan, Heather. "Boob(s On Your) Tube: 'The 100' Proves There's Nothing New Under The Sun." *Autostraddle*, 4 March 2016, www.autostraddle.com/boobs-on-your-tube-the-100-proves-theres-nothing-new-under-the-sun-330407/.

Hurley, Nat. "The Perversions of Children's Literature." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2011, pp. 118-132, jeunessejournal.ca/index.php/yptc/article/view/120/93.

James, Kathryn. *Death, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*. Routledge, 2009.

Jenkins, Christine A., and Michael Cart. *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content Since 1969*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Kokkola, Lydia. *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants*. John Benjamins, 2013.

Lo, Malinda. "2013 LGBT YA by the Numbers." *Malinda Lo*, 7 October 2013, www.malindalo.com/blog/2013/10/2013-lgbt-ya-by-the-numbers.

Mathers, Lain A.B., J.E. Sumerau, and Ryan T. Cragun. "The Limits of Homonormativity: Constructions of Bisexual and Transgender People in the Post-gay Era." *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 61, no. 6, 2018, pp. 934-952, doi: 10.1177/0731121417753370.

- Muñoz, José Esteban. "Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2-3, 2007, pp. 353-367. *Project MUSE*, doi: 10.1215/10642684-2006-037.
- Owen, Gabrielle. "Toward a Theory of Adolescence: Queer Disruptions in Representations of Adolescent Reading." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2015, pp. 110-134, jeunessejournal.ca/index.php/yptc/article/view/236.
- Townsend, Megan. "GLAAD's 'Where We Are on TV' report finds progress in LGBTQ representation on TV, but much work still to be done." *GLAAD Blog*, GLAAD, 3 November 2016, www.glaad.org/blog/glaads-where-we-are-tv-report-finds-progress-lgbtq-representation-tv-much-work-still-be-done.
- Tribunella, Eric L. *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children's Literature*. U of Tennessee, 2010.
- Trites, Roberta Seelinger. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. U. of Iowa, 2000.
- Wilson, Kim. "Abjection in Contemporary Australian Young Adult Fiction." *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*, vol.11, no. 3, 2001, pp. 24-31.

Youth Literature

- Alphin, Elaine Marie. *Simon Says*. Harcourt, 2002.
- Belgue, Nancy. *Soames on the Range*. HarperCollins, 2011.
- Berquist, Emma. *Missing, Presumed Dead*. Greenwillow-HarperCollins, 2019.
- Bick, Ilsa J. *The Sin-Eater's Confession*. Carolrhoda Lab, 2013.
- Brown, Jaye Robin. *The Meaning of Birds*. HarperTeen, 2019.

- Bunn, Scott. *Just Hold On*. Dell, 1982.
- danforth, emily m. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. Balzer+Bray-Harper, 2012.
- Davis, Devorah. *My Brother Has AIDS*. Atheneum, 1994.
- Donovan, John. *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. Harper & Row, 1969.
- Durant, Penny Raife. *When Heroes Die*. Atheneum, 1992.
- Farrey, Brian. *With or Without You*. Simon Pulse, 2011.
- Gantos, Jack. *Desire Lines*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1997.
- Garden, Nancy. *Annie on My Mind*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982.
- Greene, Bette. *The Drowning of Stephan Jones*. Dell, 1991.
- Hand, Elizabeth. *Radiant Days*. Viking-Penguin, 2012.
- Holland, Isabelle. *The Man Without a Face*. Lippincott, 1972.
- Hutchinson, Shaun David. *We Are the Ants*. Simon Pulse, 2016.
- Kaye, Marilyn. *Real Heroes*. HMH, 1993.
- Kerr, M.E. *Night Kites*. Harper, 1986.
- Kokie, E.M. *Personal Effects*. Candlewick, 2012.
- LaCour, Nina. *We Are Okay*. Dutton-Penguin, 2017.
- Lecesne, James. *Absolute Brightness*. HarperTeen, 2008.
- Levithan, David. *Boy Meets Boy*. Knopf, 2003.
- Lo, Malinda. *Ash*. Little, Brown, 2009.
- Myracle, Lauren. *Shine*. Amulet-Abrams, 2011.
- Newman, Lesléa. *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*. Candlewick, 2012.
- Peters, Julie Anne. *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me*. Little, Brown, 2014.
- Plum-Ucci, Carol. *What Happened to Lani Garver?* Harcourt, 2002.

- Rutledge, A.B. *Miles Away from You*. HMH, 2018.
- Scoppettone, Sandra. *Happy Endings Are All Alike*. Harper, 1978.
- . *Trying Hard to Hear You*. Harper, 1974.
- Sharpe, Tess. *Far from You*. Disney-Hyperion, 2014.
- Silvera, Adam. *History Is All You Left Me*. Soho Teen, 2017.
- . *More Happy Than Not*. Soho Teen, 2015.
- Smith, Andrew. *Winger*. Illustrated by Sam Bosma, Simon & Schuster, 2013.
- Talley, Robin. *As I Descended*. HarperTeen, 2016.
- Tamaki, Mariko, and Jillian Tamaki. *Skim*. Groundwood, 2008
- Taylor, William. *Jerome*. Alyson, 1999.
- Tolan, Stephanie S. *The Last of Eden*. Warne, 1980.
- Volponi, Paul. *Crossing Lines*. Viking, 2011.