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Sexuality and Gender in the Young Adult Fantasy Subgenre

Both YA and the Fantasy subgenre get a bad rap. Both are often dismissed as literary fluff, fanciful indulgences devoid of real depth or literary merit. This could not be further from the truth. The Young Adult genre is as rich in meaning and message as the Adult genre, the protagonists are just a bit younger. Important real-world issues are addressed in Young Adult literature in such a way that they appeal to a younger audience but they are equally as likely to be enjoyed by adults. Anything you can find in the world of Adult literature can be found in the Young Adult section, but the draw of YA literature is the fresh feeling of new experience and oftentimes journeys of self-discovery. Younger and older readers alike can find something in a YA book that they can identify with, either something in their present or nostalgia for the past. Similarly, the Fantasy subgenre tends to be looked down upon as just nonsense and puff pieces. In actuality, though, Fantasy novels are rooted in real emotions and human experiences. The characters in Fantasy still deal with reality in the form of true-to-life problems, they just might fly or cast a spell while doing so. The best works of Fantasy are grounded by the feelings and decisions their characters have to make, those are the elements that resonate.

In that vein, I chose to focus my Annotated Bibliography on the identity issues of gender and sexuality in Young Adult Fantasy. In my life as a reader, I have found that YA Fantasy is the genre that most openly centers these topics. With a concentration on self-awareness and self-discovery, YA Fantasy is the perfect vehicle to explore how people identify themselves. It is so important for people to see themselves reflected in art and this is especially true for young people who are just beginning to define themselves. YA Fantasy is doing groundbreaking work in showing representation of different gender identities and sexualities.

The ten novels and graphic novels I have chosen to highlight with my Annotated Bibliography feature an array of diverse characters in a variety of situations with each one representing different stages of sexual and gender identity. Some spotlight the coming out process, others the trials and tribulations of dating, but all of them showcase the quest for self-actualization and self-acceptance. They also each place a special emphasis on friendship as it plays a vital role in the LGBTQIA+ community. These are concepts that concern LGBTQIA+ and straight folks, cisgender and trans people, and growing minds as well as those that are already fully grown. These stories are working to build understanding and acceptance in the real world. And, as an added bonus, they add some magic to the mix.

Annotated Bibliography

Block, Francesca Lia. *Girl Goddess #9: Nine Stories*. HarperCollins, 1996.

***Girl Goddess #9***

(I have read this book.)

With her signature magical realistic style, Block tells nine stories of nine different girls learning about themselves and the world. From the girl with two moms searching for her father to the orphan girl with the blue fairy living in her closet, each “goddess” is discovering that life is more complicated than they ever dreamed. In the end, the “goddesses” all find that there are many different ways to live and love, each one finding peace in their own way.

Block’s short stories were really cutting-edge and groundbreaking when they were first published. Even today, there is not a lot of fiction being written about transgendered and androgynous characters. In particular, the story Tuck Budd stands out as she finds that one of her lesbian mothers is actually her biological father. These are topics that are very relevant today and could help young people understand different aspects of transgendered life. This book best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 3, 6, and 7 with its stories of strong female protagonists working through difficult and challenging personal issues.

Ellis, Grace. *Moonstruck, Vol.1: Magic to Brew*. Image Comics, 2018.

***Moonstruck, Vol. 1: Magic to Brew***

(I have not read this graphic novel.)

Julie and her new girlfriend, Selena are werewolves starting a new relationship. When their date to see a new magician ends with their friend Chet getting horribly bespelled, Julie and Selena must team up with their magical crew to save him. The two women discover they have a lot to learn about each other and relationships as chaos ensues.

(Source: <https://thequietpond.com/2019/06/08/moonstruck-volume-1-magic-to-brew-by-grace-ellis-and-shae-beagle-cute-but-somewhat-confusing/>)

This graphic novel features a lesbian relationship between two plus-sized women of color, there’s a lot to love here. The art is very cute and showcases a wide array of different body types and gender presentations. The focus on communication in relationships and self-love would be helpful to young people starting out in romantic relationships and anyone who has ever struggled with self-acceptance. This graphic novel best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 2, 3, and 7 with its tale of two lesbians trying to learn how to love each other and themselves in a thrilling adventure.

Pierce, Tamora. *The Will of the Empress (Circle Reforged)*. Scholastic Press, 2005.

***The Will of the Empress (Circle Reforged)***

(I have not read this book.)

After years apart, Sandry, Daja, Tris, and Briar reunite to help Sandry reclaim the land of her birthright. Their friendship is tested both by the manipulation of the Empress as she tries to force them to stay under her control and the fact that they have changed during the years they were separated. By coming back together, each girl grows into their own identity and magic.

(Source: <http://www.tamora-pierce.net/series/the-circle-reforged/>)

This story of female friendship fits perfectly into Pierce’s long list of feminist novels. In particular, Daja coming out as a woman who loves women and the acceptance of her old friends makes this a beneficial addition to the worlds Pierce has created. This would be a helpful book for young people who are struggling with coming out, it provides reassurance that real friends accept people for who they are. This book best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 1, 2, and 3 with its fantastic setting, exciting plot, and strong female friends coming together to survive against incredible odds.

Rowell, Rainbow. *Carry On*. St. Martin’s Griffin, 2015.

***Carry On***

(I have read this book.)

Simon Snow is The Chosen One, but he’s not really sure what he’s been chosen *for*. Baz Grimm-Pitch is his possibly evil vampire roommate who’s gone missing. Their obsession with each other grows as Simon struggles to understand his place in the world of magic and discover what on earth has become of his erstwhile evil roommate.

This book is like Harry Potter if Harry and Draco had ended up as star-crossed lovers. Rowell creates a thrilling new world and an absolutely addictive tale of two boys in love. This romance is beyond compelling and the mystery at its center is incredibly intriguing. Simon’s discovery that he does, in fact, love rather than hate Baz is such a wonderful surprise that turns the book on its head. This book would be helpful in its exploration of bisexuality and, again, the acceptance of friendship. This book best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 1, 2, 3, and 5 with its fantastic world-building and magic system and the very believable boys who fall in love in it.

---. *Fangirl*. St. Martin’s Griffin, 2013.

***Fangirl***

(I have read this book.)

Cath Reagan is obsessed with Simon Snow, the fictional hero of a series of fantasy YA novels. She’s also a twin whose twin has abandoned her at college. Alone (sort of) for the first time, Cath must figure out how to make it through her freshman year without her sister while deciding how to finish her fan-fiction magnum opus.

This novel introduces the world to Simon Snow and Baz Grimm-Pitch. As always, Rowell crafts characters who are utterly realistic. Cath’s freshman year is full of true-to-life experiences, particularly those of being new and feeling totally alone for the first time. While Cath herself is straight, her obsession with Simon Snow and her decision to write him as a gay character make for a unique dynamic. This book would be helpful for young people who are exploring their sexuality. This book best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 1, 2, 3, and 7 with its authentic look at college life and its intriguing excerpts from Cath’s Simon Snow masterpiece.

---. *Wayward Son*. Wednesday Books, 2019.

***Wayward Son***

(I have not read this book.)

In this sequel to *Carry On*, Simon Snow is depressed despite winning the war, defeating the villain, and getting the guy. What happens after the hero saves the day? That’s what Simon and Baz have to find out in their American adventure.

(Source: <https://www.rainbowrowell.com/wayward-son>)

With this third book starring Simon Snow and Baz Grimm-Pitch, Rowell continues to build and define her own special brand of magic and romance. Having declared their love during what is practically the Apocalypse in *Carry On*, Simon and Baz have to figure out how to make their relationship work and live life now that Simon is no longer The Chosen One. This book would be helpful for young people to see an authentic take on a new gay relationship. This book best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 1, 2, and 5 with its further exploration of Rowell’s world of magic and page-turning romance.

Sterling, Isabel. *These Witches Don’t Burn*. Razorbill, 2019.

***These Witches Don’t Burn***

(I have not read this book.)

Hannah is an Elemental witch living in Salem, Massachusetts trying to get through highschool without being caught doing magic or running into her ex-girlfriend. But when a horrific blood ritual takes place at the school bonfire, Hannah must team up with her ex, Veronica, to take down a deadly Blood Witch. Even though she just wants to date and finish the school year, Hannah will have to summon all her strength and power to get the girl and save her coven.

(Source: <http://www.isabelsterling.com/these-witches-dont-burn>)

This book combines the realistic troubles of high school and exes with the fantastic element of being a witch trying to fit in with regular people. That juxtaposition serves as a good metaphor for the experience of many LGBTQIA+ people who struggle with fitting in and coming out. This book would be helpful for young people to identify with having to keep part of their identity hidden for safety reasons, and for its depiction of a relationship with a former significant other. This book best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 2, 3, and 7 with its portrayal of a girl dealing with the emotional issues of dating and exes in the midst of a deadly magical crisis.

Stevenson, Noelle. *Nimona*. Quill Tree Books, 2015.

***Nimona***

(I have not read this graphic novel.)

Nimona is a mischievous shapeshifter who presents herself as a sidekick to the semi-villainous Lord Blackheart. Together they set about trying to prove that Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin and the Institution of Law Enforcement and Heroics are not the heroes they appear to be. But as time goes on, Lord Blackheart begins to realize that he doesn’t really know Nimona at all and she may be a danger to everyone involved.

(Source: <https://www.npr.org/2015/05/19/407077625/fun-fast-moving-nimona-is-a-perpetual-surprise>)

Stevenson explores shades of grey with this story of young shapeshifting Nimona. Nimona shifts into many different shapes and bodies, but maintains feminine pronouns throughout the graphic novel. Though it’s never explicitly stated, there is evidence that Lord Blackheart and Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin are former lovers. This book would be helpful for young people who are exploring gender identity and for its depiction of how *not* to deal with a former significant other. This book best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 1, 2, and 7 with its extra silly and whimsical setting and the exploration of betrayal and rejection by a loved one.

Thomas, Aiden. *Cemetery Boys*. Swoon Reads, 2020.

***Cemetery Boys***

(I have not read this book.)

Yadriel is a trans boy whose traditional Latinx family has trouble accepting his true gender. He’s also a powerful brujo. He sets out to prove these things to his family by trying to solve his cousin’s murder and summoning said cousin’s ghost. But instead he accidentally summons the ghost of his school’s bad kid, Julian. Together they work to figure out what happened, but the more Yadriel spends time with Julian, the less he wants to return Julian to the dead.

(Source: <https://www.aiden-thomas.com/cemetery-boys>)

This book deals openly and in depth with issues Yadriel faces as a trans boy. The depiction of his longing for familial acceptance and the genuine struggles of being a trans teen make it an eye-opening and realistic look at gender presentation for those who are newly out as transgendered. This book would be helpful for young people who are coming out as transgendered or who have to deal with unaccepting family in the coming out process. This book best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 1, 2, and 7 with its representation of the real problems of transitioning to another gender presentation and its look at new queer love.

Vaughan, Brian K. *Runaways: Vol. 2*. Edited by Joe Quesada et al., Marvel Publishing Inc., 2006.

***Runaways: Vol. 2***

(I have read this graphic novel.)

The Runaways, having discovered their powers and defeated their evil parents, are still adjusting to life as orphan superheroes. They have a lot to learn and a host of bad guys ready to step up and teach them. As they learn about themselves and each other, they have to figure out how to be a team and try to find some happiness while kicking super villain butt.

Vaughan writes teenagers really well, capturing their many moods and seemingly impulsive actions. This is especially true in the case of Karolina, who struggles to accept her own identity as a lesbian alien. After she comes out and comes onto her teammate Nico, Karolina has to deal with her first rejection. But the way that her friends handle her revelation is both mostly accepting and very realistic. There is also an exploration of non-binary/gender fluid identity in the form of Karolina’s newly discovered fiancé, the skrull Xavin. This graphic novel would be helpful for young people who are coming out, for those exploring their sexuality or gender identity, and for those who are dealing with rejection from potential love interests. This comic best exemplifies the Exeter Qualities 1, 2, 3, and 7 with its funny and fast-paced action packed plot, authentic look at teen friendships, exploration of gender, and same-sex rejection.