

Queer Representation in the Novels of Sophie Gonzales

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématem queer reprezentance v románech *Only Mostly Devasted* (2020) a *If This Gets Out* (2021) napsané australskou autorkou Sophie Gonzales. Cílem této práce je prokázat důležitost a relevantnost různorodé reprezentace v románech pro mládež ve spojení se škodlivými stereotypy, homofobií a toxickou maskulinitou. První část bakalářské práce je věnována definování queer literatury a literatury pro mládež a jejich historii. Druhá část této práce prokazuje svůj účel analýzou zvolených románů Sophie Gonzales, queer postav, témat, a relevantních společenských témat, které jsou v nich ve spojení s těmito postavami vyobrazeny.

Klíčová slova: Queer reprezentace, homofobie, sebe-akceptování, misogynie, toxická maskulinita, coming out

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis deals with the topic of queer representation in the novels *Only Mostly Devasted* (2020) and *If This Gets Out* (2021) written by Australian author Sophie Gonzales. The aim of this thesis is to prove the importance and relevance of diverse representation in young adult literature in relation to harmful stereotypes, homophobia and toxic masculinity. The first part of this thesis is dedicated to defining the queer and young adult literature and the brief overview of its history. The second part of this thesis proves its purpose by analysing selected novels by Sophie Gonzales, the queer characters and themes and relevant social topics associated with the characters that are depicted in them.

Keywords: Queer representation, homophobia, self-acceptance, misogyny, toxic masculinity, coming out

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I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

Queer representation in literature is an important and relevant topic that does not lose its significance even as the world and society turn more progressive and accepting of different sexualities and identities. Despite the growing tolerance, it cannot be said that queer young adults all around the world are safe or share the same experience with their sexuality. There are many aspects queer people need to think about before they deem it safe to come out, such as religion, geographical location, values of their family members and friends, or the environment they grew up in. This thesis aims to explore the diversity of Sophie Gonzales's characters from her novels *Only Mostly Devasted* (2020) and *If This Gets Out* (2021) and how queerness affects their lives, what social issues they face throughout the story and the importance of such representation and how it reflects the struggles of queer young adults. Based on the findings of this analysis, this thesis will conclude whether the representation in these novels is relevant to queer young adults and the prejudice and issues they might face when they come out.

The first part of this thesis defines the queer and young adult genre and aims to briefly summarize their establishment, development and their most vital works that all contributed to normalization of queer literature over the years. This part aims to paint a picture of the background and difficulties queer young adult genre faced before its present form. Additionally, the first part shortly introduces current popular queer literature such as *Heartstopper* (2019) which heavily contributed to making the genre mainstream and allowed Sophie Gonzales and other authors to break through the market and reach their target audience.

The analysis itself aims to explore the novels in depth to establish the relevance of depicted topics and to find out how diverse Sophie Gonzales's novels are in terms of queer representation and topics relevant but not limited to queer identity. Furthermore, a comparison between *Only Mostly Devasted* (2020) and *If This Gets Out* (2021) will be included to analyse the patterns, differences and topics that can be found in both novels and how those apply to real life situations queer young adults might face. The thesis findings suggest that analyzed novels by Sophie Gonzales broadly cover numerous topics attractive to queer young adults and heavily contribute to queer representation.

1 HISTORY OF YA AND LITERATURE

Literature, its countless genres, and forms have played an important role in people's lives since the beginning of times. Young adult literature, queer literature and by proxy queer young adult literature, however, can be regarded as brand-new genres which have been getting increasingly more popular.

According to Cart, before 1930s there was no literature specifically targeted to teenagers because at the time, teenagers—also called the adolescents or young adults—were categorized as children.¹ The youth culture which greatly contributed to the emergence of young adult literature only began after the Great Depression because majority of teenagers at the time became high school students. Youth culture emerged because of the social life which was led by high school students of that time. Social activities such as courtship rituals, dances and dating became wildly popular which was later reflected in young adult literature.² The term “juvenile” and the idea of marketing books to “the juvenile” category was introduced back in the late 1930s. The marketers who previously did not pay attention to young people—known as teens, teensters or teenagers—as much had realized the potential of the new market. Despite that, they were unable to fully explore the potential till times of prosperity which followed World War II.³

In the words of Michael Cart, young adult literature is generally regarded by experts of the field to be like: “the Broadway musical, jazz, and the foot-long hot dog—an American gift to the world.”⁴ The history of this genre is a vast one, and as difficult as it is to pinpoint who wrote the first YA book—be it Pease, Boylston or Tunis—majority of experts acknowledge the year of 1942 to be the year when Young adult literature was established.⁵ Queer young adult literature, however, unlike the young adult genre, would not be properly established until late 1960s, and that is despite the publication of adult queer novels in 1920s and 1940s.⁶ Queer young adult literature is a genre written for teenagers between the ages of twelve and eighteen with protagonists of the same age, hence why it is called young adult.

¹ Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010), 6.

² Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 5.

³ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 9.

⁴ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 3.

⁵ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 8.

⁶ Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 6.

It deals with themes that are relevant to queer teenagers and their struggles, such as self-discovery, first loves, social issues, or but not limited to discrimination.⁷

As a matter of fact, according to Cart and Jenkins, the first well-known novel containing lesbian content was called *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and it was written by Radclyffe Hall. The novel was published in England and was later declared obscene both in England and The United States. Nevertheless, despite the trial that judged the novel obscene in the United States the ruling was appealed, and the novel became a best seller. It was not the only novel of its time with lesbian content, but it was the only novel that stood out.⁸

Hall's achievement and success was followed in late 1940s by two adult novels with gay male characters. The first one was *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) by Truman Capote and the second one was *The City and the Pillar* (1948) by Gore Vidal. Cart and Jenkins argue that these novels are significant for the genre because they were written by authors who became vital for American literature.⁹ Their sentiment is not shared by Mason who believes the first significant novel of queer literature was *I'll get there. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. (1969) by John Donovan.¹⁰

While the establishment of queer literature is not easy to pinpoint, the establishment of young adult literature as a genre was preceded by the publication of the first novel written by Maureen Daly—*Seventeenth Summer* (1942).¹¹ However, Daly herself, as well as other authors such as John R. Tunis with his novel *The Iron Duke* (1938), were strictly against the idea of their books being written for young readers. Despite Daly's distaste for her book gaining the YA label, her novel was astonishingly successful, and it significantly contributed to the boom that was bound to happen in the market for literature focused on teenagers.¹²

Following the success of Daly's novel, romance fiction became broadly popular among American publishers, and in the year 1946, Betty Cavanna's novel called *Going on Sixteen* was published, swiftly followed by Rosamund du Jardin's *Practically Seventeen*.

⁷ Wayne Harrison & Bec Ehlers, "What is Young Adult Literature, School of Writing, Literature and Film, Oregon State University, accessed March 3, 2024,

<https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-young-adult-literature-definition-and-examples>

⁸ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 5.

⁹ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 5.

¹⁰ Derritt Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 3.

¹¹ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 8.

¹² Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 9.

The trend and similarities in these two novels are obvious from the get-go as they follow the topics of popularity, dating and finding true love.¹³

As the young adult genre continued to evolve and bloom throughout 1940s and 1950s, queer young adult literature had yet to become mainstream at the time. According to Cart and Jenkins, lesbian pulp paperbacks became popular in 1950s, the most popular of them all was *Spring Fire* (1952) by Vin Packer, however the content of these books usually followed the same pattern, such as young female gets seduced by a lesbian and then is later won back by a heterosexual man, furthermore majority of the lesbian characters faced death in their respective novels. Despite the tragic endings and repetitive themes, Cart and Jenkins claim these novels helped young, isolated lesbians to be introduced to lesbian communities.¹⁴

In the late 1960s, John Donovan published his queer novel *I'll get there. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. Many experts consider this novel to be the first young adult novel to deal with homosexuality. Cart and Jenkins point out that Donovan's novel was published the same year the gay rights movement was launched thanks to Stonewall riots.¹⁵ Mason argues that the publication of Donovan's novel posed the question of: "*Can young gays find happiness in YA books?*", and that is because the queer young adult novels published in late 1960s and 1970s oftentimes included themes such as divorced parents, alcoholism, violence, and deaths which, compared to previously published YA novels about dating and love was an abrupt turn of events.¹⁶

However, queer novels were not the only novels introducing darker themes. According to Cart, the young adult genre had gone through significant change in 1960s and it was due to S. E. Hinton, a teenaged girl author, and her first novel called *The Outsiders*¹⁷. Unlike Daly who wrote about young girls and first loves, Hinton was writing about boys, gangs, and class warfare. Hinton herself wrote in *New York Times Book Review* that: "The world is changing, yet the authors of books for teen-agers are still fifteen years behind the times. In the fiction they write, romance is still the most popular theme...In short, where is the reality?"¹⁸. Hinton was not the only one who longed for realism and modernity in young

¹³ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 11.

¹⁴ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 6.

¹⁵ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 6.

¹⁶ Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture*, 3.

¹⁷ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 19.

¹⁸ Susan Hinton, "Teen-Agers Are for Real," *The New York Times*, August 27, 1967, 26.

adult literature, children's book editor George Woods or Nat Hentoff, whose first novel failed, shared Hinton's beliefs as well.¹⁹

Cart and Jenkins believe that the introduction of dark themes, realism, social issues into novels happened because: "the 1960s were years of turbulent social change, of political unrest and sexual revolution" and that also included the topic of homosexuality, which reflected in the published novels as well.²⁰

Hinton's theme of lost innocence was also the theme readers can find in J. D. Salinger's famous novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and while the novel itself was not written for young adults, it greatly contributed to establishment of first-person narrative voice that is nowadays used in majority of young adult novels.²¹ Williams claims that it was mainly thanks to Hinton's success that Salinger's novel also became "a teen classic"²² and that young adult novels which were published afterwards focused on characters between ages of twelve and eighteen.²³

According to Cart, the period of 1970s is generally viewed as "remarkable for boldness with which writers began to break new grounds, both in terms of subject and style"²⁴. The most important publication of young adult literature, however, is a single novel written by Robert Cormier called *The Chocolate War*. The novel is considered to be revolutionary because Cormier boldly acknowledges that not all lives and not all novels have happy endings. And with Cormier's *Chocolate War* came many other novels and many other authors who now explored the darker side of life.²⁵

While the young adult genre bloomed, Cart and Jenkins argue that the same cannot be said about queer novels for young adults. The only significant publication of 1970s was Isabelle Holland's *The Man without a Face*, the rest of published novels followed the same repetitive patterns, predictable plots focused on the misery of gay people's lives. It is also worth mentioning that homosexuality was viewed by many as a social problem which then led to queer literature getting labelled as "problem novels".²⁶

¹⁹ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 20.

²⁰ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 8.

²¹ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 22.

²² Williams, *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, 2.

²³ Williams, *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, 2.

²⁴ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 24.

²⁵ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 24.

²⁶ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 17.

When talking about Donovan's *I'll get there. It Better Be Worth the Trip.* and Holland's novel, Mason points out that these two novels in particular are often labelled as too stereotypical and harmful by critics, Cart and Jenkins included. These critics argue that such book oftentimes negatively impact the readers.²⁷ However, Mason goes on to mention that another critic, Heather Love goes against the rest and is, just like Mason, in favour of "dark, ambivalent" texts.²⁸ Another ground-breaking novel of that time was Judy Blume's *Forever* which was published in 1975 and it was the first novel to include explicit descriptions of sexual intercourse between two teens. According to Cart and Jenkins, *Forever* and a few other exceptions were the only novels to include explicit content before, during and after the 1970s as the rest of the authors preferred to handle writing sexual scenes in the forms of fade-ins.²⁹

Towns notes that late 1960s to 1980s are characterized by their lack of diverse queer literature as there is no character who is ordinary and whose sexual orientation is not the concern of the book. Majority of the novels focused on coming out to loved ones and dealing with homophobic abuse. Towns also points out the tendency of authors to tell their stories from heterosexual perspective.³⁰

In the 1980s also came the revival of romance in young adult literature, however, majority of the content at the time closely imitated unrealistic novels from 1940s and 1950s. All the progress from previous decades had almost disappeared as bold, provocative, dark-themed novels were pushed back in favour of copy and paste romance stories which followed the same pattern. The cause for this was none other than publishers focusing more on what the market research claimed teenagers wanted rather than what they needed. And what teenagers of that time wanted was adult genre romances and gothic paperbacks.³¹

Additionally, Towns points out that mid-1970s to mid-1980s was a period that saw an increase in publication of works that showcased adolescent homosexuality as increasingly complex but decreasingly moralistic, a trend that already existed since the beginning of the queer literature.³² Cart and Jenkins, however, do not agree with Towns's perspective, and argue that while the queer literature published in 1980s was oftentimes not of high quality,

²⁷ Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture*, 21.

²⁸ Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture*, 20.

²⁹ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 19.

³⁰ Caren J. Town, *LGBTQ Young Adult Fiction: A Critical Survey, 1970s-2010s* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017), 23

³¹ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 30.

³² Town, *LGBTQ Young Adult Fiction: A Critical Survey, 1970s-2010s*, 24

it certainly saw an acceleration in the pace of which queer novels were written and published which led to increased visibility of queer characters.³³ There were approximately forty titles published in that time, ten included lesbian characters while the rest focused on male homosexuals. And while gender bias was somewhat expected in that period, the truth is the imbalance increased in 1980s compared to 1970s. Cart and Jenkins also point out the fact that unlike the young adult literature of that time, queer novels remained mostly outside the romance genre. The only notable exception to this rule was Nancy Garden's *Annie on my Mind*.³⁴

Nonetheless, the 1980s were not only an era of stereotypical romance novels, but there were also a few culturally important debuts as well, such as Francesca Lia Block or Chris Crutcher. Already established voices, such as S. E. Hinton or Robert Cormier, continued to be heard despite the influx of romance novels, and legendary editors, such as Charlotte Zolotow or Jean Karl, agreed that while original authors may find it difficult to get published, young adults will find themselves in need of books that will broaden their views as their lives evolve. The 1980s was also an era of new multicultural novels which came to existence following the influx of immigrants that came to America after the establishment of new amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act that limited the number of immigrants from Europe but allowed more immigrants from all around the world.³⁵

One of the voices of the new multicultural literature was Asian American writer Laurence Yep who wrote about his own experience with growing up as an outsider and his young adult novels, such as *Sweetwater* (1973), *Child of the Owl* (1977) or *The Serpent's Children* (1984) were a powerful reflection of his experiences as an Asian American. African American writers had their literary renaissance following the Voting Rights Act of 1965, literature focused on their struggles and their voices boomed within five years. When speaking about diversity in young adult literature, Cart goes on to mention that in the late 1980s, it brought up the question of political correctness because an increasing number of critics started to question whether the texts were authentic to the ethnicity they portrayed. It is noted that in the past, majority of these texts were written by white authors outside of the cultures and it sparked the debate whether these texts can be accepted as valid.³⁶

³³ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 35.

³⁴ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 35.

³⁵ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 32.

³⁶ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 36.

In the 1990s, lesbian novels continued to aspire to create a community for lesbians. As an example of such, Town highlights Bonnie Zimmerman's novel *A Safe Sea of Women* (1990). The novel focuses on lesbian history and has mainly lesbian characters. The author herself once said that lesbian novels are read by lesbians "in order to affirm lesbian existence."³⁷, however the author acknowledges that these novels can also "limit readers' ideas of what it means to be a part a lesbian community".³⁸ Lesbian novels in 1990s have mostly moved away from portraying lesbianism as a threat and mainly focused on how young women deal with their sexuality.³⁹

As for queer literature in general, Cart and Jenkins point out that it does not exist in vacuum and the literature continues to reflect current trends and "prevailing cultural, social, economic and even political attitudes"⁴⁰. Cart and Jenkins highlight two novels which illustrate the range of different coming out narratives and the attitudes of people towards the LGBTQ community. The first novel was Joyce Sweeney's *Face the Dragon* which portrays a coming out scene between two childhood friends and the second novels was Paul Robert Walker's *The Method*. Both books deal with male homosexuality however the reactions to coming outs are vastly different. In Sweeney's novel, the reaction is largely negative, the protagonist himself treats his sexuality as something problematic and his friend urges him to change his mind so he would not make his life more difficult for himself. In Walker's novel, however, the protagonist tries to be supportive of his homosexual friend who refers to himself using not only positive and neutral words but also the negative ones that were used for male homosexuals. Such negative depictions of homosexuality prevailed in majority of the published books at the time.⁴¹

However, it is important to note that the negative attitude towards homosexuality in late 1980s and 1990s was caused mainly by HIV/AIDS and how it was portrayed in young adult novels, that is: only adult males contacted AIDS.⁴² There were thirteen novels in total that dealt with the disease and out of the these, only of them and that was Deborah Davis's *My Brother Has AIDS*, has a young adult as an infected character. Nonetheless, in all these

³⁷ Bonnie Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 3, (1981): 461.

³⁸ Bonnie Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 3, (1981): 461.

³⁹ Town, *LGBTQ Young Adult Fiction: A Critical Survey, 1970s-2010s*, 51.

⁴⁰ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 66.

⁴¹ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 66.

⁴² Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 67.

novels, the protagonist is never the infected character, it is mainly the adult uncle or a teacher.⁴³

When speaking about AIDS, Mason observes that the young adult genre tends to represent the disease as “*simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, a looming threat that nonetheless typically leaves young protagonists untouched*”⁴⁴. Mason agrees with Cart and Jenkins’ observations about who is usually the infected character, it is mainly parents, uncles, or strangers but never the protagonist. It is also mainly portrayed as an issue of the past that no longer has any effect on the present time. Mason notes that young adult literature tends to not represent AIDS as a part of young adult’s lives.⁴⁵

According to Cart, the early 1990s were times when many authors wondered whether young adult literature would survive because of weakening sales because teenagers moved to horror, and this was not only reflected in book sales but also in box office.⁴⁶ The cause for this sudden change of interest was because of the boom in films, radios, journalism, and TV which were filled with realism and readers were looking for escapism in horror and unrealistic romance series.⁴⁷ Cart notes another significant change that happened to young adult books at that time which was the decrease in age of protagonists. Characters were no longer seventeen, they were between the ages of twelve and fourteen.⁴⁸ This led to a new genre of literature which Cart refers to as middle school literature which also led to young adult novels ending up in the children’s department.⁴⁹

Cart and Jenkins refer to the late 1990s as a time of recovery and expansion for young adult literature. There has been an increase in creative growth and literary sophistication which has yet to stop. The Young Adult Library Services Association, also known as YALSA, has played an important role in the revival of young adult literature. YALSA established the Michael L. Printz Award which finally led to acknowledgement of the young adult genre which has led to an enrichment of the content.⁵⁰

Cart noted that the late 1990s were a “dramatic turning point for young adult literature”⁵¹ and numerous changes took place at the time. One of those changes was YALSA

⁴³ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 67.

⁴⁴ Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture*, 67.

⁴⁵ Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture*, 67.

⁴⁶ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 39.

⁴⁷ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 40.

⁴⁸ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 41.

⁴⁹ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 42.

⁵⁰ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 68.

⁵¹ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 46.

presenting a program called “How Adult is Young Adult?” which focused on the revival and expansion of YA audience because the genre lost majority of its original audience in the early 1990s. Another important step was the removal of young adult novels out of children’s department as they were given their own spot.⁵²

Another important milestone happened in 1995 with the publication of R. J. Hamilton’s two-volume Pride Pack series called *Who Framed Lorenzo Garcia?* and *The Case of the Missing Mother*, which portrayed fully realized queer support group, something that was scarce in previous queer novels. Cart and Jenkins note that while the plot was predictable and not of exceptional quality, the novels offered “an attractive picture of community that embraces many differences”.⁵³ There were also two ground-breaking queer pieces. *Hard Love*, a novel about a teen who seeks out a queer community and the first novel to win a major literary honor which later helped other queer novels get into mainstream literature. And the second was a collection of short stories by Marlon Dane Bauer called *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence*.⁵⁴ The series demonstrates diverse narratives that include half male homosexuals and half lesbians together with nine queer protagonists and seven queer secondary characters. This series is significant because it anticipated future trends of diversity in queer literature.⁵⁵

⁵² Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 46.

⁵³ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 88.

⁵⁴ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 89.

⁵⁵ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 90.

2 MODERN QUEER AND YA LITERATURE

When speaking of modern young adult and queer young adult literature, Williams notes that it is now more adult than young and that is because unlike other genres, everyone was a teenager once, which is why YA novels are so popular nowadays.⁵⁶ Nowadays, Deborah L. Williams argues that young adult literature is: “more A than Y”, in other words, she believes that while it is still marketed towards young adults, the young adult genre is vastly enjoyed by adult audiences. It is possible to notice this trend in fandoms such as Harry Potter.⁵⁷

However, despite the growing popularity, Mason, Cart and Jenkins point out the on-going lack of diversity that has been going on since the beginning of these genres. Mason notes that queer YA fiction has “*historically foregrounded White, middle-class, cisgender male protagonists*”.⁵⁸ According to Mason, queer YA novels are dominated by boys and men. Mason’s claim is supported by data from 2003 to 2013 which shows that 45 percent of novels had male cisgender protagonist, 33 percent had cisgender female protagonist, only 6 percent featured queer protagonist, 4 percent then had transgender protagonist and 12 percent of queer YA novels dealt with a protagonist with queer friend or family member.⁵⁹ There was a little improvement in 2015-2016 statistics which showed that 10-15 percent of protagonists were either intersex, nonbinary/genderfluid or gender-destabilizing. Still, however, 55 percent of queer YA novels featured cis male protagonists and 31 percent were cis female protagonists. And not much has changed in the following years either. Nonetheless, Mason points out that in 2018, there was an increase in novels with multiple queer main characters.⁶⁰

Cart and Jenkins note that there was a drastic increase in the number of queer novels published in the 21st century. While it was only a little under 300 titles between the years of 2001 and 2009, the number jumped to almost 600 titles from 2010 till 2016. This was due to small publishers who specialized in queer titles entering the field and while these publishers focused on a small number of titles, they still made a significant contribution to the queer industry.⁶¹ This increase in published titles led to an increase in queer main characters. From 2000 to 2004, there were 39 novels with queer protagonist, from 2005 to 2009 it was 59

⁵⁶ Williams, *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, 3.

⁵⁷ Deborah L. Williams, *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 3.

⁵⁸ Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture*, 5.

⁵⁹ Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture*, 22.

⁶⁰ Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture*, 22.

⁶¹ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 125.

novels, from 2010 to 2016 it was 429.⁶² Cart and Jenkins say that: “if one of the purposes of young adult fiction is to give faces to every teen, LGBTQ literature can be regarded as being increasingly successful”.⁶³

Young adult literature also saw an increase in popularity. Cart argues it was mainly caused by the increase in teenagers’ demographic. A statistic from 2001 showed that teenagers from the ages of twelve to seventeen bought 35.6 million books just in that year alone which understandably made them the target group of librarians, publishers and booksellers and the number has continued to increase in the following years. In 2015, Cart notes, the YA industry alone was popular enough to sustain the whole book industry, however Cart has found out through an interview with David Gale that the industry is over-publishing YA novels because there are just too many books which then leads to lack of creativity, sloppy publishing, and lack of innovation.⁶⁴

Following Cart’s findings, Mason points out the popularity of dystopian YA franchises such as Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* or Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*. According to Mason, numerous critics contemplated the effects and the possible dangers these titles may pose for young readers, however the darker themes appearing in YA and children’s book is nothing new as children’s literature has always engaged with the topics of cultural issues, sociopolitical concerns, and graphic violence.⁶⁵

This opinion is shared by Williams who put J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter under scrutiny to find out how the series addresses pressing issues such as xenophobia, racism, or nationalism.⁶⁶ According to Williams, the Potter books are for readers who “*grew up with family histories of displacement, migration, diaspora, as well as readers who consider themselves the product of multiple identities*”.⁶⁷ Cart highlights the extraordinary and surprising success of Harry Potter and other fantasy titles as well because it overcame the popularity of romance fiction. As of 2020, the Potter series sold over half of billion copies. It was reported that the series took up so many spots on Best Seller lists that The New York Times had to create a separate category for children’s best sellers. The Harry Potter success

⁶² Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 126.

⁶³ Cart and Jenkins, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, 126.

⁶⁴ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 86.

⁶⁵ Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult literature and Culture*, 89.

⁶⁶ Williams, *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, 8.

⁶⁷ Williams, *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, 114,

contributed to a more widespread publication in the United States.⁶⁸ Cart believes the cause for this enormous success is due to the characters, their interrelationships, and the fact that J. K. Rowling allowed them to grow up together with the readers as each book ages them up a year. It is also important to note that while the first books are aimed at children, the last three titles are in the young adult territory as they get gradually darker, as the characters grow older.⁶⁹

Following the success of Harry Potter, the industry obsessively focused on finding another best seller which happened to be Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series. While Harry Potter is a fantasy filled with magic, *Twilight* is fantasy romance about vampires, both however had so much success with their audience that they forever changed the industry.⁷⁰

If readers were to look for an equivalent to these YA bestsellers in the queer YA category, they would certainly find it in Alice Oseman's graphic novel *Heartstopper* which took the world by storm in 2020. Similarly to Harry Potter, the novel's target group are teenagers as the novel's protagonist is a male student who goes to all-boys grammar school. The protagonist goes by the name Charlie Spring, and he meets Nick Nelson, they form a friendship which gradually turns into something deeper. Oseman follows the trend of queer YA books and does not include mature themes in her works as the characters are still minors.

Heartstopper's success led to a boom of queer YA fiction which opened doors not only for authors such as Sophie Gonzales but also for Eastern queer publications, such as Japanese Yaoi, Korean BL or Chinese Danmei. As a matter of fact, the first Chinese uncensored danmei, which is a Chinese term for books with romantic relationship between two males, called *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* was published by Seven Seas Entertainment just a year after *Heartstopper* and other danmei books quickly followed suit. This has led to other publishers licencing more Chinese queer novels for publication overseas which helps battle the issue regarding diversity in content on the western market as danmei follows Chinese culture and it is written strictly by Chinese authors which guarantees authenticity.

As for Sophie Gonzales, she is an Australian author who writes young adult queer contemporary fiction.⁷¹ Gonzales's first queer mystery novel *The Law of Inertia* was

⁶⁸ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 91.

⁶⁹ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 92.

⁷⁰ Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 94.

⁷¹ "Home," Home, Sophie Gonzales Books, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://www.sophiegonzalesbooks.com/home>.

published in 2018, *Only Mostly Devasted* followed in 2020, *Perfect on Paper* and *If This Gets Out* in 2021. When asked about her plans for her upcoming books during an interview back in 2021, Gonzales expressed how important it is for her and for her identity as an author to write about queerness and under-represented minorities because she strongly believes everyone deserves to have their story told.⁷² Furthermore, Gonzales explicitly confirmed that she plans to continue writing about queer characters and their stories, however, instead of only tackling heavier topics, as can be observed in *If This Gets Out*, she hopes to write a fluffy, funny contemporary queer romances as well. In an interview for SGN, she expressed her hopes that her novels will contribute to the acceptance that queer people do not have to look or behave a certain way to fit into the queer community.⁷³

⁷² Sophie Gonzales, "GROK Spotlight: A Conversation with Sophie Gonzales," interview by Emma Ruben, *GROK*, March 16, 2021, <https://grokonline.com.au/2021/03/16/a-conversation-with-sophie-gonzales/>

⁷³ Sophie Gonzales, "Sophie Gonzales Talks Opposite-Sex Queer Representation," interview by Lindsey Anderson, February 25, 2022, <https://www.sgn.org/story.php?313371>

3 ONLY MOSTLY DEVASTED

Only Mostly Devasted is a high school queer romance set in Collinswood in North Carolina. It follows the story of gay protagonist Oliver, mainly referred to as Ollie, who comes from California but spends the summer over at North Carolina together with his family because of his terminally sick aunt Linda. During the summer at the lake, he meets a boy, Will, and develops feelings for him. It appears to be mutual as they spend the summer together in their own seemingly happy bubble. Except when Ollie is forced to move to North Carolina because his aunt's health is rapidly deteriorating, he finds himself to be attending the same high school Will goes to and the boy Ollie fell in love with is now nowhere to be found. In Ollie's eyes, Will turns from an affectionate boy who appeared to be comfortable with his own sexuality into stereotypical and arrogant basketball jock who completely ignores Ollie's existence.

It is important to note that *Only Mostly Devasted* is written using the first-person narrative, which means the reader is not given any insights into minds of other characters besides Ollie which limits the knowledge of Will's circumstances and feelings. Given that Ollie is from a liberal state and grew up in accepting environment, this could potentially lead to a lack of understanding of circumstances surrounding other queer characters.

3.1 Ollie and Will's Relationship Development

The book starts with Ollie trying to get in touch with Will after their summer fling is unofficially over—unofficially because Will and Ollie promised each other that they would keep in touch, they exchanged phone numbers and Will gave Ollie promises of sweet nothings. Ollie repeatedly attempts to message Will, only to be left disappointed because Will ignores all his attempts. Ollie then gets the news that his family will be moving to Collinswood for the time being so his parents can help and take care of Aunt Linda while Ollie will be mostly babysitting Linda's kids. On one hand, Ollie is disappointed and mad because he is forced to leave his own life and friends behind, on the other hand he is ecstatic because that means he and Will are going to be living near each other.

It is important to mention that part of the reason why he is mad about leaving California is because he is out to all his friends and was accepted by them since majority of the people is open-minded. While he is not scared per se, he is worried about having to go through the coming out process all over again. He faces his fear on the first day of school, Ollie meets Juliette, a gifted clarinet player, who later introduces him to her small group of

friends—Niamh, plus-sized girl who wants to be a model and Lara who appears to be rather hostile to people around her but who argumentatively goes through the most impressive character development. When the girls start talking about their summer shenanigans, they include Ollie in the conversation however, he is reluctant to share his summer love experience with them and attempts to steer the conversation away from the topic. The girls probe at him till he tentatively admits that he spent the summer with *someone*⁷⁴. While it is normal for people to use the gender-neutral term when talking about the topic, in the context of Ollie's queerness, it is fair to assume it was used purposely since Lara previously referred to Ollie's love interest as a girl. By using the word *someone*, Ollie does not directly confirm nor deny the gender of the person in question which further highlights his reluctance to openly come out. His reluctance, however, is not rooted in being ashamed or worried about the reactions. He wishes people would treat his sexual orientation the same way straightness is treated, as it is natural and normal, rather than something he is forced to clarify. Despite himself, he confesses to meeting a boy after Juliette asks him to clarify the gender of the person.

Weirdly, it was hard to make my mouth form the word. After all these years being comfortable and confident in myself back home, I felt fourteen again. And I did not appreciate it.

Juliette nodded like she'd expected it. Niamh raised her eyebrows and tilted her head, as though she'd spotted a rare bird or something. Lara blinked, and made a lemon-sucking face.⁷⁵

Ollie's reference to being fourteen suggests that his confidence with being queer is not something that came to him naturally but rather it is a skill he had to master over the years. It also suggests that before he came out to his family and friends, he feared not being accepted and it was only because of how open-minded people close to him were that he managed to feel comfortable with his sexuality. In context of young adult people exploring and discovering their sexualities, this showcases the need for support, love and acceptance from their peers and family members as it can affect the way they view themselves and their sexual orientation. It also highlights, how despite all the progress that has been made over the years, queer people still fear rejection and being treated as abnormal.

⁷⁴ Sophie Gonzales, *Only Mostly Devasted* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), 23.

⁷⁵ Gonzales, *Only Mostly Devasted*, 23.

In the same scene, using Juliette, Niamh and Lara's reactions to Ollie's coming out, Sophie Gonzales introduces their personalities and personal beliefs which in many ways reflect different types of real, living people. Juliette, as previously mentioned, appears to take Ollie's coming out the best, she simply accepts it which indicates that she is open-minded. Niamh appears to be surprised; however, it is not clear whether it is caused by Ollie's straightforward admittance or by his sexual orientation, this leaves her character in a neutral position. In that moment, she is neither an ally nor a foe. Lara has, out of the three of them, the strongest reaction which can be interpreted as one of disgust which, further down the plot, causes Ollie to be wary of her and her intentions. Before the scene portraying Ollie's coming out and the girls' reactions come to an end, Ollie shows them Will's picture, unaware that the girls know Will because Will happens to go to the same school. Neither of them, however, tell Ollie, instead they change the topic and invite him to a party where Ollie and Will reunite.

The reunion between them does not go the way Ollie imagined, for number of reasons. First, as previously mentioned, Ollie was not aware that Will attended the same school just as Will was not aware of Ollie's presence. Lara, whose reaction to Ollie's coming out was not very accepting, makes a point to tell Will, in front of everyone, that Ollie told the girls everything about his summer romance. To Lara's credit, she does not go into details, nor does she say anything about Ollie spending the summer with Will, of all people. Despite that, the way she so happily mentions their conversation makes her attitude seem threatening, like she is actively holding the truth over their heads.⁷⁶ The scene perfectly represents the fear and panic closeted queer young adults go through when the wrong person finds out about their sexuality. It creates fear of being exposed, of possibly being threatened with the information, it causes uncertainty and anxiety, especially so if the closeted person lives in unsupportive environment. In the case of Ollie, it also causes regret because he realizes in that moment, that he unintentionally outed Will and that his actions might have scary consequences because he is unsure how the girls will handle the information. Will's feelings on the matter are difficult to interpret, however, it can be assumed that he was not happy with Ollie's actions based on how he dismissed Ollie afterwards and went back to his group of friends.

The significance of this scene does not only lie in their reunion, it also lies in the way Sophie Gonzales continues to develop the circumstances surrounding her characters. When

⁷⁶ Gonzales, *Only Mostly Devasted*, 34.

Will goes back to his friends, who are male basketball players, there is a moment when Lara, who previously appeared disgusted by Ollie's sexuality, can be seen making out with another female character named Renee, all that while the basketball team cheers them on. The purpose of that kiss, based on the way Lara and Renee behave afterwards, is for the boys' entertainment and to further feed their faux-lesbian fantasies. This moment in the book represents how in real life, lesbians are widely fetishized by straight men because the idea of two women kissing is viewed as attractive, however only if it is done for the benefit of their pleasure and entertainment. Furthermore, the scene demonstrates how one of the reasons why Will is still in closet could be that he fears his friends' reactions.

As the book progresses, it becomes clear that Will's friends play a big role in his reluctance to come out as there are many instances where his friends' behaviour ruins whichever progress Will and Ollie's relationship has made. During one of many conflicts between him and Ollie, as Ollie struggles to accept this new version of Will and Will struggles to accept himself, Will indirectly confirms that his friends tend to be homophobic and that they treat Ollie's sexuality as a joke by trying to set each other up with Ollie, which forces Will further into the closet because he fears receiving the same treatment.⁷⁷

Similarly to how Lara and Renee's kiss was treated, Will's friends see homosexuality as a source of entertainment for them. Their assumption that Ollie would even entertain the idea of dating one of them reflects how in real life, gay men are often jokingly told not to fall for their male, straight friends which is a harmful stereotype rooted in homophobia. Another similar instance where Will's friends, namely his best friend Matt, make things difficult for Will and Ollie's relationship is after the two of them find a common ground and agree to be friends. During a conversation with Juliette, Ollie finds out that Will has been talking about him during lunches, mentioning casual things related to him.

"Yeah. Just casual stuff. Like, 'Oh, Ollie thinks this,' or 'Ollie told me a story about that once.' Well, he was, anyway. Then Matt asked when the wedding date is. He hasn't really brought you up since, now that I think about it."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Gonzales, *Only Mostly Devasted*, 73.

⁷⁸ Gonzales, *Only Mostly Devasted*, 102.

Matt's careless remark causes Will to shut down again, seemingly ruining the small progress he has made since reuniting with Ollie. While Ollie seems frustrated by Will's inability to stand up to his friends and be himself, taking their ages into consideration, it is understandable why Will behaves the way he does as young adults often desire to belong and to be accepted by their peers, even at the cost of not being fully themselves. It is also important to note that Matt's remark is not only harmful in relation to Will's sexuality and his friendship with Ollie, but it also suggests that men, regardless of their sexuality, cannot be interested in each other's likes and interests without being romantically involved. Matt seems to believe that men are incapable of emotional and fulfilling connections with one another which could be caused by his upbringing. Similar behaviour can be observed in Will's family as well which only further confirms that Will's reluctance to come out is due to unsupportive environment which is a stark contrast to Ollie's own experience.

The first time Ollie's invited to Will's house, he gets a glimpse of the toxic environment Will has grown up in. Will's entire family is there, his young cousins included, and the family is preparing to celebrate Thanksgiving together. There is a moment when the kids, two girls and one boy, prepare a cheerleading routine to show the adults and while they perform, the male members of the family can be heard expressing their displeasure with having a boy participating in what they view as an activity meant for girls. One of the male members points out how the young boy, Kane, seems to be having more fun than the girls and advises his father that Kane should spend more time with his brother.⁷⁹

This moment gives an insight into what Will has to deal with. It is obvious, given the context clues, that some of the family members would be less than supportive if he came out. The scene represents the toxic masculinity stereotypes that are often pushed onto boys from a very young age as they are expected to act within the bounds of traditional male gender roles. In the case of Kane that would mean quitting dancing in favour of playing basketball with his brothers. The male members of Will's family do not care that Kane is young and might grow out of it on his own, they see his hobby as a threat to his masculinity and therefore believe it should be eliminated before Kane takes on even more, of what they think are, feminine traits. In contrast to Kane's situation, Will is struggling with a similar issue as he is expected to become a professional player even though he wants to be a nurse and help people which, taking his family's beliefs into consideration, is not an acceptable career for a man. Another instance where femininity in men is portrayed as something to be

⁷⁹ Gonzales, *Only Mostly Devasted*, 142.

laughed at or something abnormal, is during a prom party where Will, Matt and the rest of the basketball team take a photo together, purposely posing in a feminine way and laughing about it together. This scene can be interpreted in two different ways, either as misogyny rooted in toxic masculinity which, based on the Thanksgiving scene, is a learnt behaviour or as sign of homophobia rooted in harmful stereotypes as gay men are oftentimes labelled as feminine. Both interpretations, however, are rooted in the boys' toxic upbringings and their behaviour reflects the environment they grew up.

The prom party is not only worth mentioning because of the basketball team's ongoing toxic behaviour that continues to stall Will's self-acceptance, it also represents a breaking point for their turbulent relationship and signifies a growing point for Ollie's character. Till the prom, Ollie and Will have been stuck in a vicious circle of breaking up and making up without truly going back together which was mainly caused by Will's justified fear of coming out to his family and friends. Each time they fought, Ollie grew closer to the realization that with how things were at the time, with Will's hot and cold behaviour and with Will's inability to return his feelings even in private, the relationship between them was harmful to Ollie and his mental health. While he was still willing to dance with Will at the prom party which could be interpreted as him clinging to the hope that maybe things could be looking up for them, his hope is destroyed because as soon as Matt gives them a weird look, Will puts a stop to their moment and instead goes and starts dancing with his ex-girlfriend to appease his friends. In this instance, Will attempts to get the situation back under control by appealing to heteronormative norms which are highlighted in the relation to the prom party as everyone expects to be going with the opposite gender. This is only further confirmed when the basketball team assumes that Ollie will be on his own because of his sexuality. The basketball team's expectations together with the pressure coming from Will's family for him to act within the bounds of traditional male gender roles make it an impossible situation for Will to navigate and so he resorts to hiding his true-self and appeasing his environment while disregarding Ollie's feelings. His decision, while justified, is no longer met with Ollie's understanding and Ollie breaks up with Will for good, putting himself and his mental health first. As much as Ollie understands why Will acts the way he does, Ollie can no longer ignore the way it affects him, nor can he accept all of Will's excuses as to why he has been treating Ollie so carelessly since the end of summer. His decision to end their relationship is met with protests from Will's side as Will accuses Ollie of not knowing what it is like to be queer in North Carolina because he had the luxury of

growing up and coming out back in California. It is important to note that Sophie Gonzales has used the different geological locations to her advantage while portraying the environments Ollie and Will grew up in which greatly contributed to making *Only Mostly Devasted* more realistic. She draws a contrast between Ollie, who spent majority of his life in California, a long-term democratic state, that is known to be progressive and accepting regarding different sexual orientations and Will, who has been living in North Carolina, a swing state, where conservative and liberal ideologies have an equal support among the inhabitants with Will's family taking on more conservative values. The difference between Ollie and Will's upbringing and environment allowed Gonzales to explore the differences between a queer teen who is confident and comfortable with his own sexuality and a closeted queer teen who is forced to perform according to heteronormative and toxic expectations to stay safe and be accepted by his family and friends.

The way the environment impacts Ollie and Will can be observed throughout the entire book as they live through two completely different experiences. Where Ollie is confident and comfortable with being queer because of his supportive family and friends, Will has been forced to stay in the closet because of the toxic masculinity values forced onto him by his family and the blunt homophobia expressed by his friends. Where Ollie has been able to dress the way he likes and pursue hobbies and career he enjoys, such as music, Will has been ridiculed by his friends for attending music lessons and forced to pursue a career his family picked for him because being a nurse is not something that would be acceptable as it would threaten the stereotypical male gender roles. Where Ollie has been able to recognize and judge the toxicity and harmful behaviour of Will's friends because he is confident with who he is and he comes from an accepting environment, Will has been forced to participate in the harmful actions in fear of losing his friends. The contrast between them and the different situations perfectly reflects how in real life, queer young adults might live through completely different experiences purely based on where the person lives, grows up and what values their family profess. It is because of that that is important to keep in mind that no one's circumstances are the same and therefore while someone might find it easy to come out, someone else may never do so because it would not be safe for them.

After Ollie and Will go two separate ways, they both reflect on themselves and their behaviour which allows them to grow and mend their relationship once they reunite after Ollie's aunt dies. The significance of their reunion after their breakup lies in Will's father's behaviour because he tells Will not to close the door of his room the next time he has Ollie

over, which is a rule that should only apply when Will has a girl over. It is not the first time, however, that Ollie and Will were in his room alone, the first time being during the Thanksgiving dinner when they were almost caught kissing by Will's father. His request to keep the door open can be interpreted as him realizing that there is more to Will and Ollie's friendship, just as it can be interpreted as him accepting his son's sexual orientation without directly acknowledging it. His unspoken acceptance leaves Ollie and Will shocked as it goes against everything they believed Will's family stands for. This is not the only instance where Will's environment starts proving to be more accepting than Will thought possible, his friends from a basketball team turn out not to be as close-minded as they appeared to be considering their inappropriate behaviour and the trouble it caused. During one lunch break when Will asks about Lara, Matt expresses his confusion because he believed they both had a crush on each other. This is how Ollie finds out that Matt believes Lara is a lesbian and that is why he stopped trying to flirt with her as a sign of respecting her sexual orientation. Will and Ollie take it up for themselves to fix the misunderstanding, Ollie talks to the basketball team and explains that Lara is bisexual, and that Matt did not lose his chance to date her. For the first time since he moved over, the basketball team seems to accept him.

This change of behaviour, both from Will's father and the basketball team, allows Will to reflect on his sexuality and his circumstances, he realizes he has made many mistakes and openly communicates with Ollie which signifies an important step in his character growth. Will apologizes for the way he ignored Ollie's feelings; he acknowledges that he treated Ollie unfairly and that he only realized once he thought of himself in Ollie's shoes. Will then invites him to his game on Friday which Ollie rejects at first because his band must prepare for a performance at that time. Will's decision to invite Ollie to his game can be interpreted as a sign of inner acceptance, as his way of expressing that he is ready to be himself and that he is no longer afraid of facing rejection from his family and friends. The sudden bravery is connected to Will's father's actions, namely indirectly acknowledging that Will and Ollie are more than friends, and to the basketball team's acceptance of Lara's bisexuality which made Will feel more confident about his own coming out. Will has realized, thanks to these two moments, that his sexual orientation would not change anything between him and his close ones and therefore he has nothing to fear. Similarly to Will, Ollie's character also grows when he realizes and acknowledges that despite Will's behaviour, Ollie never really tried to compromise and meet him in halfway. He asked Will for things Will was not ready to give him while he never offered anything back. This shows that Ollie is

ready to face his own shortcomings and accept that regardless of Will's actions, it was not fair of him to push for a relationship while Will was not ready for such a big step yet, especially given Will's circumstances that Ollie has familiarized himself with throughout the plot. Following this, Ollie decides to attend Will's game which can be interpreted as him being ready to try again and to support Will in any way he can without demanding anything in return. The game is a pivotal moment for the protagonists. Due to the circumstances that had led to this moment, such as Will's father's silent acknowledgement, Lara's coming out and the basketball team's acceptance, Will finds the strength to openly and boldly come out when he kisses Ollie in front of everyone. This represents his character growth from a repressed, closeted queer boy who feared rejection to a queer young adult who no longer wishes to hide who he is and who accepts himself and his sexuality.

3.2 Lara's Character Development

Lara is a repressed female bisexual character who first appears to be homophobic, based on her reaction to Ollie's coming out. The depth of her character is revealed bit by bit as the story progresses. Her journey to coming out as a bisexual can be compared with Will's as they both grew up surrounded by similar environment and as they share the same group of friends and yet they both handle their queerness differently which will be further elaborated on as this chapter progresses. As previously mentioned, at the beginning of the book, Lara is seen making out with a girl in the middle of a party while the basketball team, and most importantly Matt, watch the scene unfold while cheering Lara on. The other girl, Renee, is a straight girl with a long-term boyfriend, it is revealed that making out together is something they do to catch the attention of the boys they like – in the case of Renee it's her boyfriend and in the case of Lara, it is Matt. Compared to Will, who has resorted to heteronormativity in order not to draw attention to his sexuality, Lara does the exact opposite and uses her sexuality to catch the attention of Matt. It can be argued, given the circumstances, that while Lara was cheered on for kissing a girl, if they roles were reverse and Will was seen kissing a boy, the basketball team's reaction would be vastly different. The reason for this is that, as previously argued, straight men find lesbians and bisexual women to be attractive while at the same time, they find gay men to be repulsive.

Similarly to Will, however, Lara first struggles coming to terms with her sexuality. When she and Niamh get into an argument caused by Lara's harmful comment about Niamh's appearance, Niamh accuses Lara of being insecure and of seeking the basketball

team's approval by kissing Renee. Unlike Niamh, Ollie, who is present during the argument, believes Lara might be struggling with internalized homophobia. However, when he tries to comfort Lara and tell her she is allowed to kiss whoever she pleases, he is dismissed as Lara pretends Niamh's words did not hurt her.⁸⁰ While Lara confidently claims she does not care for the opinions of others, her words contradict her actions, as seen in the first scene where she kisses Renee. At that point in the plot, her behaviour could be interpreted as a denial of her sexuality which can be observed in the way she repeatedly denies her attraction to Renee or in the way she actively argues that kissing Renee never meant anything to her. This is further supported by Ollie noticing, on numerous occasions, that Lara seems hurt whenever she sees Renee together with her boyfriend. Lara first shows signs of character development when she openly admits to Ollie that the thing between her and Renee had been going on for a year. She then claims it meant nothing because they were drunk, and Renee was off limits as she was in a relationship. Lara's admission can be interpreted as her making peace with her sexuality while coming to terms that her relationship with Renee was harmful to her. In comparison to Ollie and Will's relationship, which was at some point in the book portrayed as toxic as well, the main difference is that despite his feelings, Will did not want to be seen with Ollie because he was worried about people's reactions while Renee only used Lara for attention and for the pleasure of her boyfriend who liked to watch them kiss.

In terms of the representation, both portrayals are significant for different reasons. In the case of Ollie and Will, it shows that regardless of how much someone loves another person and despite good intentions and justified fears, as long as both sides of the relationship do not take the other person's feelings into consideration, only focus on their own struggles and do not communicate, even the purest relationship can be harmful to the participants. However, if both sides acknowledge their shortcomings, reflect on their past behaviour and then actively work on themselves to be better for their partner, the relationship can still turn healthy. In the case of Lara and Renee, their relationship represents that even if something feels good and fun while it is happening, it does not mean it is good for the people involved. It shows that if one person in the relationship is not willing to do better or to acknowledge their mistakes and instead, they actively continue to harm the other person, it is alright for the hurt person to let go of such relationship and heal. The different portrayals contribute to the authenticity of *Only Mostly Devasted* and serve to make the character stories even more relatable to queer young adults because relationships, especially between young people, can

⁸⁰ Gonzales, *Only Mostly Devasted*, 88.

be turbulent and it is important to know when to keep fighting for the other person and when to let them go.

From this point on, Ollie and Lara call a truce which develops into a friendship. Another sign of Lara's character development can be observed on multiple occasions when she actively stands up for Ollie in front of the basketball team while Will, who should be the one standing up for Ollie in the first place, remains silent because he is worried his behaviour could expose his romantic feelings for Ollie. This shows her development from a snarky girl to a compassionate young woman who is not afraid to stand up for what is right even when everyone else stays silent. Lara actively fights back against homophobic and misogynistic remarks that come from the basketball team, and she is not afraid to point out the boys' toxic behaviour. Furthermore, during the prom party, Lara shows repulsion for what she has done in the past which is a significant milestone in her development as she acknowledges her mistakes and shows remorse for her actions.

"Well...what if I was wrong? What if I betrayed queer women by doing that? Even if it was for me, and I didn't give a shit what those guys thought, wasn't I still basically reinforcing the idea that my sexuality is just to get a guy off? I mean, think of the crap people say about bi girls only wanting attention."⁸¹

From the perspective of Lara's inner conflict regarding her past actions, there are many factors that need to be taken into consideration, namely her age, her attraction to Renee despite her feelings for Matt and her environment. While it can be argued that Lara played into harmful stereotypes by kissing Renee to get Matt's attention, at the time she was a repressed queer young adult who grew up in a conservative environment which made it harder for Lara to embrace her sexuality and explore it in a healthier way. Despite the main purpose behind kissing Renee in front of the basketball team, it is undeniable that Lara enjoyed her shared moments with Renee and regardless of her crush on Matt, she was, to a certain extent, attracted to Renee as well, which can be observed on numerous occasions throughout the book. Furthermore, Lara's reason for kissing Renee gave her an excuse to safely explore her sexuality without giving much away which earned her the time and space to come to terms with who she truly was. In terms of bisexual representation and what this

⁸¹ Gonzales, *Only Mostly Devasted*, 200.

moment says about Lara's character, it makes her undeniably a human and as wrong as her actions might have appeared, she is a bisexual woman exploring her sexuality in the only way she knows how. If she were a straight woman trying to appeal to the male gaze by taking advantage of another woman, that could be considered harmful to bisexual women. This was not, however, Lara's case as she herself is bisexual and all she did was explore her sexuality in a way that was safe for her.

While Ollie and Will's relationship is in shambles after the prom party, Lara is outed against her will in the school's cafeteria when Renee starts to yell at her that she is not attracted to Lara and that Lara got the wrong impression. All that while Renee's boyfriend watches it happen. It is obviously done on purpose as Renee screams at Lara despite standing in front of her which catches the attention of everyone present. It then spreads around the whole school, and everyone comes to the false impression that Lara is a lesbian—Matt who has a crush on her included. Lara, however, is bisexual and returns Matt's feelings. When the rumours of her being a lesbian spread, she gets cornered in the hall by a group of girls. They ask Lara if she knew she was into girls while they were undressing in the backstage at the Sophomore Showcase, implying that she took advantage of them and somehow harassed them at the same time which is another harmful stereotype: many homophobic people believe that queer people of the same gender are automatically attracted to them. And as the girls try to accuse her, Matt and other team members unexpectedly stand up for her.

Matt leaned one arm against the brick wall. "But, seriously, fuck her. If she or anyone else gives you shit, let me know, all right? That shit's not cool, and I'm not afraid to play dirty."

Darnell must have noticed the admiring look Niamh was giving Matt, because he jumped in with, "Yeah, me too. Who cares if you're into girls? The world keeps spinning, you know?"⁸²

The basketball team's acceptance of Lara signifies an important character growth for them as till then, they did not pose as a safe harbour for their queer friends, be it Lara, Will or Ollie. Their fetishism of lesbians and bisexual women, their internalized misogyny, their homophobic behaviour all contributed to Ollie's insecurities, Will's fear and Lara's reluctance to accept herself. At the end of the book, the basketball team apologizes for their behaviour, and they promise not to joke in such harmful way anymore, showing that they

⁸² Gonzales, *Only Mostly Devasted*, 218.

have reflected on their behaviour and were willing to work on themselves so their friends could feel safe with them.

4 IF THIS GETS OUT

When it comes to queer representation, *If This Gets Out* does not compare to *Only Mostly Devasted*, which is why the chapter focusing on this novel is comparably shorter. It follows the story of protagonist Ruben, who similarly to Ollie has his sexuality all figured out and is comfortable with being gay, and his love interest and bandmate, Zach, who believes he is straight but soon realizes he has hidden feelings for Ruben. They are part of a famous boy band together with Jon and Angel who are aware of Ruben's sexuality and accept him for who he is. Despite that, Zach is worried about coming out, he is worried he is mistaking momentary attraction for real feelings and that he is leading Ruben on. Compared to *Only Mostly Devasted*, in *If This Gets Out*, Ruben and Zach do not have to face humiliation and insensitive jokes from their friend group, however, they are forced to stay in the closet and are purposely separated by their management. The book deals with similar core issues as *Only Mostly Devasted*, namely exploring Zach's sexuality and developing his and Ruben's relationship. *If This Gets Out* is set in a completely different environment from *Only Mostly Devasted* which creates unique obstacles and challenges for the protagonists.

Unlike *Only Mostly Devasted* where the reader relies on Ollie's exclusive point of view, in *If This Gets Out*, Sophie Gonzales uses dual, first-person narrative which gives the reader an insight into the minds of both protagonists, allowing for a deeper understanding of their thoughts and motivations. Furthermore, compared to *Only Mostly Devasted*, the content of this book deals with heavier topics, such as alcohol and drug abuse, and yet it remains in the queer young adult category because it explores topics that are relatable to young adults, such as exploration of sexuality, coming out to family members, first relationships or even fighting for one's rights.

4.1 Ruben and Zach's Relationship Development

When the story begins, Ruben already has a crush on Zach, however, he is determined to ignore his feelings because he believes Zach is straight, and he is unwilling to risk their friendship. When the book switches to Zach's point of view, there are signs of him being attracted to Ruben right from the beginning, such as when he is on a call with his mom, gets a message from Ruben and smiles so wide his mom assumes it is a girl texting him.⁸³ This scene is shortly followed by Angel's birthday party where Zach gets jealous when he sees

⁸³ Sophie Gonzales, *If This Gets Out* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2021), 22.

Ruben talking to a guy. However, he mistakes his feelings of jealousy for worry which is later explicitly confirmed by him when he and Ruben get together. Zach later finds out that the boy Ruben was talking to at the party attempted to use Ruben for connections in the industry. That is followed by Zach having an inner monologue comparing Ruben to a dream guy despite still firmly believing he is solely attracted to girls.⁸⁴ As the story goes on, Ruben starts to fight with his developing feelings, and he repeatedly reminds himself that Zach is straight after he gets butterflies when Zach touches him.⁸⁵ Their friendship allows Ruben to be physically close to Zach without making it weird as they are quite touchy with each other and generally comfortable with physical intimacy on the platonic level.

In contrast to *Only Mostly Devasted* which dealt with toxic masculinity and its harmful impact on male-on-male friendships, in *If This Gets Out* Sophie Gonzales explores healthier representation of male friendships as all four boys, regardless of their sexualities, are comfortable with each other to the point they are not afraid of being physically affectionate with each other which signifies their maturity and their confidence in their own masculinity as they do not have to pretend to be tough and emotionally unavailable to fit the toxic stereotypes of a typical male. Furthermore, in terms of queer representation, unlike in *Only Mostly Devasted* where Ollie knew Will was queer, in *If This Gets Out*, Ruben is not aware that Zach is straight-passing queer young adult so until the two of them kiss. Till the kiss, Ruben does not think much of being affectionate with Zach as he believes they are simply best friends. This shows the depth of their bond. In addition to that, it is important to note the importance of portraying healthy platonic relationships between men of different sexualities as men in novels are oftentimes portrayed using harmful stereotypes rooted in toxic masculinity which causes further harm in real life as it enforces those stereotypes and beliefs.

Over the course of the book, there are many instances where Zach is pinning after Ruben with him not fully realizing the implications of such thoughts. One of the instances is when he thinks of kissing Ruben after pressing his hand over Ruben's mouth to silence him.⁸⁶ Zach catches himself thinking of how soft Ruben's lips feel against his palm, but he quickly justifies that by telling himself he wants to use the same lip balm Ruben's using the next time Zach kisses a girl. Zach's denial of his feelings continues even when Ruben and

⁸⁴ Gonzales, *If This Gets Out*, 30.

⁸⁵ Gonzales, *If This Gets Out*, 40.

⁸⁶ Gonzales, *If This Gets Out*, 52.

he exchange shirtless Snapchat pictures. This scene, despite how comfortable the boy group is with one another, can hardly be interpreted as platonic, which is further supported by Zach getting excited over the idea of Ruben finding him attractive. In addition to that, Ruben's picture reminds Zach of a boy from his middle school days.

A face flashes into my mind. Lee, from middle school, with the dimple. I used to pull up his profile picture, a photo of him staring intensely at the camera, and study it, searching for the spot where the dimple would be if he smiled.⁸⁷

His self-denial continues when he thinks of his previous relationships and uses them to convince himself he is straight. His line of logic is that since he never had to pretend when he was with a girl and that his sex life was thriving, there was no way he was anything but straight because his crushes on girls were a recurring presence in his life. Zach does not entertain the idea of bisexuality even when there is solid evidence of his attraction to both genders. In another instance, after Zach kisses Ruben in a heat of a moment, Zach still struggles with the idea of being attracted to a male despite him being the one initiating the kiss in the first place.

It was one of the best kisses of my life. It practically blew my mind; how good it was. But that makes no sense, because he's a guy. I want a girlfriend. Like, when I think of my future, I think of myself with a wife, a house, and a dog.⁸⁸

Zach's behaviour and his refusal to acknowledge his own attraction in those examples can be interpreted as a case of internalized homophobia with Zach being terrified of developing feelings for another male, let alone be sexually attracted to one. Zach represses his own feelings and his own sexuality and uses heteronormative beliefs to convince himself of being straight. Considering this mindset has been going on since Zach was young, it can be assumed it is a taught behaviour, most likely caused by conservative society as Zach's mother does not seem to mind when he comes out to her later. Zach's struggles and his way

⁸⁷ Gonzales, *If This Gets Out*, 57.

⁸⁸ Gonzales, *If This Gets Out*, 78.

of seeking comfort in heteronormativity can be compared to *Only Mostly Devasted's* Will who used similar behaviour to hide his sexuality out of fear of being rejected by his family and friends. The main difference between Will and Zach is that Will was aware that he was queer, and he acknowledged his feelings for Ollie, however he was brought up in conservative household which forced him to stay in closet. Zach, on the other hand, grew up with his mother who is accepting of his sexuality, he himself, however, is not as he represses any feelings he develops towards men. These various portrayals are crucial for young queer adults as many of them might struggle with internalized homophobia without them even realizing. Despite the progress and despite how much more accepting the society these days is towards queer people, there are still many stigmas, stereotypes, intolerance and overall negative perceptions regarding homosexuality which can, if the queer person grows up in such environment, lead to them taking on those beliefs and applying them to their own sexuality which seems to have happened with Zach.

Similarly to Ollie and Will, Ruben and Zach's relationship has quite a turbulent development as they fail to openly communicate with each other after their first kiss, mainly because both interpret the moment differently. Ruben believes Zach wants to experiment while Zach believes he crossed Ruben's boundaries because Ruben did not kiss him back. This leads to several conflicts that escalate. The breaking point comes when Zach asks Ruben for a space after the kiss and Ruben fails to grant him that. This shows a certain level of selfishness and immaturity from both protagonists as Zach is actively running from giving Ruben an explanation for kissing him while Ruben is actively pushing Zach into acknowledging something he is not ready to face yet due to his internalized homophobia. At this point in the book, it is clear the two of them are at a stage where they are not yet good for each other similarly to how Ollie had to put a stop to his and Will's relationship after Will repeatedly disregarded his feelings. The first signs of character development happening appear when Zach first considers the possibility of being bisexual which happens during the time he and Ruben are not on speaking terms with one another. Zach finally acknowledges that the kiss meant something, and it was not just him being curious or trying to experiment. This is not only significant because of Zach's characters growth but also because Zach thinks back to his past and recalls numerous instances during which he felt attraction towards another male. Zach's self-reflection leads to him acknowledging that he is bisexual, however, the fear caused by his internalized homophobia remains as it is not something Zach's ready to deal with just yet. That is further supported when Zach and Ruben finally

openly communicate with each other for the first time and Zach confesses that he is afraid of speaking and acknowledging his feelings for Ruben despite finally accepting that he is queer.

Zach's acknowledgment of his sexuality is followed by him coming out to his mother, which leads to him feeling disappointed and hurt because instead of showing support right away, she accuses him of being just like his father who kept secrets from her. Her behaviour turns the pivotal moment of Zach's life bittersweet, and it almost makes Zach regret coming out to her in the first place. The misunderstanding gets clarified the next time they speak because his mother apologizes and admits that she believed Zach would not want her to treat his coming out as a big deal. It becomes clear that she was not upset about Zach coming out but rather about him keeping it a secret from her. Ruben's family situation, on the other hand, is a bit more complicated than Zach's. His mom accepts his sexuality, but she is not supportive, her only concern is his fame and opportunities that could be endangered by his queerness. When he admits to her that their company will not let them come out, instead of being comforted, he is met with criticism and told to think of his future and career. His mom then goes on to refer to his relationship with Zach as a "high school relationship"⁸⁹ implying that she does not think it will last. While till this point, Zach and Will seemed to follow similar patterns, both repressed, both struggling to accept themselves, when it comes to their family situation, there is a clear difference as Will's family was one of the main reasons why he was afraid of coming out whereas Zach's mother does not mind, her focus on the wrong thing at the wrong time however still upsets Zach and ruins the moment. Meanwhile, in the case of Ruben, who is similar to Ollie, his mother is aware of his sexuality but otherwise she only cares about what brings Ruben the most fame, disregarding his feelings which shows that while she may be accepting, she is overall not very supportive. All four portrayals are crucial as they paint a picture of different kinds of families and reactions queer young adults might face in their lives. It is important to realize that sometimes conservative parents, such as Will's parents, might be more supportive than open minded ones, such as Ruben's mother. This reflects that sometimes, having good personal beliefs does not necessarily make the person in question a good person, in the end it is more about actions than words and in the case of Ruben's mother, she failed as a supportive parental figure.

⁸⁹ Gonzales, *If This Gets Out*, 311.

As the book nears its end, Ruben's frustrations with being kept in the closet start reflecting in his relationship with Zach and he starts feeling unsatisfied with Zach's people-pleasing tendencies. Ruben starts to worry that he might have pushed Zach into coming out to their band then to his mom and once his irrationality reaches its peak, he starts to worry that he might have pushed Zach into their relationship because his feelings were hurt and Zach felt guilty. This eventually leads to them fighting and they almost break up. This moment helps Zach realize that his passive approach would not get him anywhere and the fear of losing Ruben helps him come out of his shell to fight for what he wants. He does not miraculously start being assertive, but he reassures Ruben that he wants their relationship, he wants to come out, he does not want to stay in the closet anymore and he will work on himself. They come up with a plan together with their bandmates who are tired of their company controlling their every move and they come out during one of their concerts. This shows a significant step in character growth for both protagonists as Ruben realizes that he might have come off as pushy at the beginning of their relationship which allows him to further mature and grow since he acknowledges his past missteps, although there is still room for improvement since his self-reflection almost leads to the break-up with Zach which only serves to show that they both still need to go through more self-reflection and growth before they fully mature. Compared to Ruben, however, Zach's character development is much more impressive as he goes from repressed straight-passing boy who was afraid to speak of his feelings to queer young adult who is willing to, despite his fear, publicly fight for his rights and his relationship.

4.2 Ruben, Zach & Chorus Management's Hidden Homophobia

Right from the beginning of the book, it is obvious that Chorus management has no plans of being supportive of Ruben's and later Zach's sexuality and their relationship. They have been keeping Ruben in the closet since the start of their career with empty promises of eventually letting him be himself—Ruben, however, is sure it will never happen. While they are not outwardly homophobic, it is evident they only care about their profits and their company image, this is showed right before the band goes on their tour.

“Another thing,” she says. “The paparazzi here are probably even worse than they are at home. So, if you have something you don't want the entire world knowing, I encourage you to be discreet.”

Everyone goes silently still as she looks at Ruben.⁹⁰

The message of this scene is quite clear as Ruben is indirectly told to watch his own actions to keep his sexuality a secret from the public. The manager's behaviour is problematic for numerous reasons. First, she is singling him out and by doing so, she makes it seem like his sexuality is a problem to be suppressed. Second, she makes it seem like Ruben is the one who wants to keep his homosexuality a secret instead of being forced to do so by the company. And lastly, she is so much more concerned about the public finding out about Ruben's sexuality than she is about any other possible scandal, such as Angel's drug addiction. This reflects how in real life, many closeted people are told to reconsider their coming outs to preserve their image or career with little to no regard of their feelings and desires because in some places, being queer is still treated as something that is better not to bring up. This is not the only instance where the management only does what benefits them and their image, and by proxy the image of the group. There is a scene, which happens during the period Ruben and Zach do not speak with each other, where the management forces them to pose for a picture. The management does it to reassure the public that the band members get along. However, in comparison to that moment, the exact opposite starts happening when Zach comes out to the management. From that moment on, he and Ruben are separated during every single band activity. This reflects how the management has no issue using them for their own gain, such as servicing the fans and encouraging their idol-shipping fantasies but in a manner that is fully controlled by the management. However, as soon as they started to develop real feelings for each other, suddenly that was a threat to the company and to the band. This is further supported by the scene during which the group is asked about shipping between the members. Shipping, in this context is a favourite fan activity, and real-life occurrence, where fans take two people who, they think would make a great couple and start imagining them as such. It is usually accompanied by fan works, fan art, videos where the fans try to look for signs of their favourite pairing dating. The magazine gets quickly shut down and threatened with legal action. An example of similar behaviour in real life can be seen with male kpop groups where companies use fan-service and shipping to boost the group's popularity and sales. However, if a kpop idol comes out as queer, their career is essentially over because both the companies and the fans are not supportive of that which

⁹⁰ Gonzales, *If This Gets Out*, 51.

reflects how being queer is only allowed when it is done for the pleasure and entertainment of someone else. This magazine fiasco is followed by the company commissioning an article about their past lovers to clear up any doubts and rumours despite the information being largely made up.

As the book progresses, the management keeps adjusting their promise to let Ruben and Zach come out. At first it is after their Russia tour because they do not want to endanger them, then when Angel gets into an accident with drugs it gets postponed because they do not want another scandal and then once they are ready to come back it is postponed because of promotions but the reality is they are not planning to let them come out. This is what leads to Ruben losing his patience, he confesses to Zach that he has been asking to come out since he was sixteen, but they never let him, and Zach realizes that he and their relationship will face the same treatment. When they decide to come out after their almost break-up, their manager attempts to stop them by turning off their mics while on stage but one of the staff is a lesbian woman and she helps them out.⁹¹ The company then threatens to sue them, accuses them of making them seem homophobic and abusive, they try to force them into a corner to punish them, but they backtrack as soon as another label expresses their interest in their band Saturday. Their boss tries to make up with the boys but is quickly turned down as they all realize that he is once again only using them for profit because their coming out led to fans mass-streaming their songs. The boss's behaviour only serves as a confirmation that the company is only willing to acknowledge their queerness because that would bring them even more money. They do not care about Ruben or Zach, their feelings or well-being, the company only sees them as a source of profit and the fact that they were ready to sue the boys for making the company seem homophobic speaks volumes about their inappropriate behaviour. In the end, the group chooses their freedom over their old label and they move on with their lives with the support of their fanbase and their family members.

As previously mentioned, *If This Gets Out*, does not offer a wide range of representation when it comes to queer characters, however, that does not take away the importance of the novel. Gonzales uses Zach's character to explore the struggles of internalized homophobia, which many queer young adults experience while growing up. She brings attention to the exploitation of queer identity by people in power, such as employers, in circumstances when it is beneficial for them, their reputation and profits. Furthermore, Gonzales explores the notion of young men being confident in their own sexualities and with

⁹¹ Gonzales, *If This Gets Out*, 360.

their own masculinity. This is important as young men face the pressure to perform within the bounds of toxic masculinity otherwise, they are labelled as weak and feminine. The novel contributes to erasure of harmful stereotypes by having Ruben, Zach, Angel and Jon attempt to communicate in a healthy manner, openly express their emotions and by being physically affectionate with one another. Therefore, despite the lack of queer representation, the novel explores significant topics that are relatable to current generation of queer young adults and the issues that they face.

5 ONLY MOSTLY DEVASTED AND IF THIS GETS OUT: FINAL COMPARISON

To conclude, the content and differences of these two Sophie Gonzales novels, both follow similar patterns. One protagonist is openly queer while the love interest is repressed, closeted bisexual. In *Only Mostly Devasted*, Will's struggles reflect the environment he grew up in, which was North Carolina, a swing state, with his family being conservative. In *If This Gets Out*, Zach's behaviour is caused by his internalized homophobia. Both couples go through character growth which is reflected in the development of their relationship. In case of Ollie and Will, they learned to communicate and acknowledge their mistakes with Will admitting to not taking Ollie's feelings into consideration whenever he was acting hot and cold. On the other hand, in case of Ruben and Zach, they learned to be patient with each other and to fight for their right to be out and proud, unashamed of their queerness. When it comes to the couple's families, there is a contrast between both novels which is that in *Only Mostly Devasted*, both protagonists have full families, in *If This Gets Out*, only the mothers are present. Furthermore, in *Only Mostly Devasted*, Ollie's family is accepting and supportive while Will's family is first rather conservative but once he comes out, they accept him. In comparison, in *If This Gets Out*, both mothers are accepting of their queerness, however only Zach's mother is supportive since Ruben's mother only cares about his career.

The biggest difference between these two novels is the setting. *Only Mostly Devasted* takes place in high school and focuses on the development of Ollie and Will's relationship which makes for a much more relatable and realistic experience with plentiful queer representation as Ollie and Will are not the only queer characters. The novel is more suitable for queer young adults as it deals with topics relatable to them, such as coming out, fear of rejection from family and friends and first relationships. *If This Gets Out* tells a story about a famous boy group whose members deal with issues that are connected to fame, mental health and unfair management rather than focusing solely on Ruben and Zach's sexualities and the development of their relationship. The novel still has enough queer representation and there are many topics that might be relatable to young adults; however, it is so much more mature and plot heavy than *Only Mostly Devasted*.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyse queer representation in the novels *Only Mostly Devasted* (2020) and *If This Gets Out* (2021) written by Sophie Gonzales. Furthermore, this thesis analysed the importance of queer literature, and the struggles connected to queerness and adolescence. Alongside the topic of queer representation, this thesis explored the genre of queer and young adult literature, its themes and features, and it briefly introduced the history of queer and young adult literature since the establishment of young adult literature in 1940s. During the analysis of Sophie Gonzales's novels, the attention was not only put onto the characters' sexualities but also on the circumstances, environment, their family situation, their character development and social issues such as misogyny, fetishism, internalized homophobia or toxic masculinity.

The analysis of *Only Mostly Devasted* focused mainly on the relationship between the protagonist Ollie and his love interest Will. Ollie was in the role of an outed gay young adult man while Will represented a closeted bisexual male who grew up in a conservative family. Alongside Ollie and Will, the novel's sub-plot focused on a repressed bisexual female character Lara and her acceptance of her sexuality. Ollie and Will had to repeatedly deal with homophobic jokes, harmful stereotypes and toxic masculinity rooted in misogyny from the side of Will's family and friends. In comparison, Lara and her sexuality faced constant fetishising from the male cast of the novel.

In comparison, *If This Gets Out* deals with the struggles of being a part of a famous boy group and the difficulties one faces in showbusiness. The protagonists are Ruben, confident young gay male, and Zach, a repressed bisexual male who struggles with internalized homophobia. The novel follows the development of their relationship and Zach's character growth while also dealing with issues such as exploitation, alcoholism or drug abuse. Unlike *Only Mostly Devasted*, this novel explores healthy masculinity, supportive friend group and tolerant family members.

In conclusion, while the novels follow similar patterns and character development arcs for its protagonists, they offer a wide range of issues that are still relevant to current generation of queer young adults. The author creates two different settings and tells two different stories, each representing different social issues which makes for diverse representation, not only in relevance to queer identity but also to the social issues and harmful stereotypes still surrounding it. Furthermore, Sophie Gonzales continues to

represent the queer community in her other novels, such as *Perfect on Paper* (2021) or *Never Ever Getting Back Together* (2022), which makes her a significant contributor not only to the queer young adult genre but to the queer community itself.

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