

The Kids Are Not All Right

Why LGBTQIA+ Representation in Literature Matters

JAYNE WALTERS

Let's start off with a question. How old were you when you read your first book with a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, or asexual character in it?

Now another question—how did that story end? Probably not well, and that's not uncommon.

Throughout much of history, in literature featuring LGBTQIA+ themes, the character, or characters, does not have a good outcome. These books feature common themes, which often revolve around being assaulted, contemplating or completing suicide, being murdered, dying alone—often of an incurable disease—a woven death shroud of dark conclusions for characters who stray from the straight and cisgender.

Thankfully, when it comes to LGBTQIA+ literature today, we have witnessed marked improvements. Not only are the themes getting better, with more queer joy and more characters whose stories don't revolve around their sexuality or gender identity and expression, but there's also more representation than ever.

Cisgender gay white characters have long dominated LGBTQIA+ literature, and publishers are becoming more inclusive with each day. More, and better, books are hitting the shelves, and this literature is quickly escaping its niche as a category.

Malinda Lo's multiple award-winning *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, Kyle Lukoff's 2022 Stonewall Children's Award winning *Too Bright to See*, and Leah Johnson's 2021 Stonewall Honoree, *You Should See Me in a Crown* are a few examples of books leaping into mainstream recognition.

At the same time, conservative groups are pressing for more book restrictions and removals than ever before. They compile lengthy lists of hundreds of books to which they object, and share them widely. Anyone looking at those lists out there can see that the focus of the attacks, as always, is on books featuring BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ characters and topics.

Saundra Mitchell is one YA author whose books have been challenged and banned in multiple states this past year. In an October 2022 statement on one set of her books, she wrote,

“Removing us from books, movies, websites, textbooks, documentaries—removing us from schools and libraries—will not erase us. It will only mean that your children, the children of your community, your families, your flesh, who have been so fearsomely, wonderfully made—will suffer the way we did in decades past.

“They will fight, and many will lose, the battle against depression and suicide—not because we're born mentally ill, but because we're made that way by a world that hates us, openly.”¹



Jayne Walters, Branch Manager of the West Indianapolis branch of the Indianapolis Public Library (IndyPL), has worked in libraries for over fourteen years. She is the first openly transgender manager in IndyPL's history. She is a contributing author in the upcoming book, *Trans and Gender Diverse Voices in Libraries* (Litwin Books).

Mitchell is right when she says these efforts “will not erase us.” Every day, children all over the country are facing the challenges of not just the everyday goings on of school, but constant threats and attacks on who they are as people. You might be asking, “Is it really that bad?”

It’s worse than you might think.

In February 2022, Cathryn Oakley, state legislative director for the Human Rights Campaign, said 2022 was “poised to become the year of the most anti-LGBTQ legislation” in the United States.²

She was right, and it looks as though 2023 will be even worse. The constant attacks on the LGBTQIA+ community from the legislative level makes it harder to navigate even everyday life. “Recent political attacks aimed at transgender and nonbinary youth have not only threatened their access to health care, support systems, and affirming spaces at school, they’ve also negatively impacted their mental health,” said Dr. Jonah DeChants.³ Because of this, it’s vital for the mental wellbeing and the very survival of children to be able to find support where they can.

Many factors can account for homelessness of LGBTQIA+ youth, but family conflict is the primary cause, which is disproportionately due to a lack of acceptance by family members of a youth’s sexual orientation or gender identity.⁴ When they aren’t dealing with the onslaught from the government or their family, they face it at school. Unfortunately, it’s not just from other students. Fifty-eight percent of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff, and 72.0% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff.⁵ These numbers are up from 52.4% and 66.7% respectively in GLSEN’s 2019 National School Climate Survey.

When comparing 2021 numbers to the 2019 ones, sadly, there has been an increase in negative experiences across the board. One example showed a 20% increase in these negative experiences, with four in five LGBTQIA+ students reporting feeling unsafe in school because of at least one of their actual or perceived personal characteristics compared to six in ten from two years previous.⁶

“Notably, the most common reason that LGBTQ+ students gave for feeling unsafe in school concerned their SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression) characteristics—68.0% reported that they felt unsafe in school because of one or more of these characteristics.”⁷

In addition to being targeted in the ways already mentioned, it’s happening on an administrative level as well:

- 29.2 percent had been prevented from using their chosen name or pronouns in their schools
- 27.2 percent had been prevented from using the bathroom that aligned with their gender
- 23.8 percent had been prevented from using the locker room that aligned with their gender

- 20.6 percent had been prevented from wearing clothes deemed “inappropriate” based on gender
- 16.0 percent had been prevented from playing on the sports team that is consistent with their gender⁸

These are based on the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth. News of these experiences, in addition to the climate in which they live, leads to growing concerns and fears from others. Many of these concerns stem from bills introduced in 2022 and with more of them on the horizon for 2023.

- 93 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth said that they have worried about transgender people being denied access to gender-affirming medical care due to state or local laws.
- 83 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth said that they have worried about transgender people being denied the ability to play sports due to state or local laws.
- 91 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth said that they have worried about transgender people being denied access to the bathroom due to state or local laws.⁹

Another point of fear for LGBTQIA+ children and teens is the increase in armed presences protesting queer activities for children, and gun violence in formerly safe queer spaces. Even their everyday school and home lives are fraught.

I’ve had conversations with youth who actively avoid taking books home with LGBTQIA+ themes because they fear the backlash at home. These are young people who have to hide who they are from their family. One young lady who had opened up to me and talked about a break up with her first girlfriend confessed that she would never come out to her family because she “knows” they’d throw her out. Two years later and she’s still hiding her true self and her girlfriend of over a year from her family, with at least two more years until she is able to move out. Fortunately, publishers are doing a better job of making books that feature LGBTQIA+ characters less conspicuous and more universal cover art.

So, what can librarians do to improve this climate? The first step is to establish yourself as a known ally, creating a space where children can feel safe to be themselves.

There are several ways to do this. One of the first and probably the most important ways that you can, as a librarian, is by continuing to purchase LGBTQIA+ literature. Even as groups continue to challenge and ban those books, you must do your part by supporting the authors who write these mirrors and windows for our youth. That tells the publishing houses that there is a need for them, and it forces the ones challenging to do the work themselves.

Shying away from making those purchases out of fear of the challenge or ban is called soft censorship. You are, in effect, doing their dirty work for them when you self-select away from queer literature for children and teens.

Don't label or segregate your LGBTQIA+ material. These are windows, just as much as they are mirrors. The more that children can read and learn about other people and their experiences, or even just see this representation as people who are just living their lives, the better. When the material is separated out and away from all the other material, it's less likely to be picked up by anyone, queer or not.

Labeling is thought by some to be helpful, but it is actually harmful. During an author talk, I received some insight from author Mitchell.

"Labeling books as 'queer' has the advantage of hurting readers three ways," she said. "The first is that it's literally painting a target on queer students who carry those books around, inviting bullying or—considering new legislation in Texas and other states—actual CPS intervention in their home lives. The second is that it implies these books are *only* for queer students, discouraging straight, cisgender students from exploring them—slam that window shut! And the third is the question of who or what defines a 'queer' book? Is having one gay side character enough? Can the leads be queer, but not actively discussing queer topics? It's impossible to cover the spectrum of queer children and teens in literature with a single label, because books are for people—not for categories."¹⁰

While those labels can make children a target, you can take that same thought process and flip it around for good. A small ally sticker on your laptop, a pride pin on your lanyard, a Safe Space sticker on the door to your classroom, office, or library might be tiny in appearance, but they act as a lighthouse in the dark storm that these children are navigating every day. About half (51.9 percent) had seen at least one Safe Space sticker or poster at their school.¹¹ It takes very little effort to make a massive impact in a child's life.

In addition to using labels for good, take the harassment that these kids are going through seriously. The GLSEN climate

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study also stated, "LGBTQ+ Students' Reports of School Staff's Responses to Reports of Harassment and Assault—60.3% reported that the 'Staff Did Nothing/Took No Action and/or Told the Student to Ignore It.'"¹²

It's evident from the surveys that bad news spreads and impacts youth in harmful ways, but it's important to know that word of a supportive teacher/librarian/staff spreads quickly among children as well.

It's apparent that there are going to continue to be targeted attacks on LGBTQIA+ literature and on the rights of these children. Libraries can make fantastic safe havens for many marginalized communities, and I've heard numerous stories from other librarians that libraries welcomed them when other places and people wouldn't.

We can discover new worlds in books, but we can also find ourselves in books. We can discover people who feel the way we do, and find the words for who we are in those pages.

The kids are not all right, but with your help, they could be better. &

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