"A Balance Between the Real and the Fictive": Writing Nuanced Queer Representation in Young Adult Historical Fiction

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Abstract

Historical Young Adult fiction is booming, but there is still a vast disparity in whose stories are being told – or rather, not told – as there remains a lack of queer representation in the genre. This article investigates why this might be the case and makes recommendations for how to write queer characters that strike the fine balance between historical facts and the sensibilities of a modern audience, based on the work of three authors writing in the genre: Mackenzi Lee; Rachael Lippincott and Benjamin Alire Saenz. I identify the 'queer joy approach', the 'romanticising approach' and 'chiaroscuro' as narrative strategies in their works. Finally, the article explores how I have implemented these strategies in my own creative practice.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, LGBTQIA+, LGBTQ, queer representation, historical fiction*

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Since the publication of the *Dear America* novels in the 1990s (various authors), which are widely considered to be the first historical series for Young Adults (YA), the YA historical genre has grown, making possible the creation of such lists as '21 YA Historical Fiction Books to Read Now' (Beyond the Bookends Blog, 2024) and in 2010, the Historical Association even created the Young Quills Award, which is awarded annually to the best historical novel for children and young adults. While the growth of the genre can be seen as a positive development, as historical fiction is a great way for young readers to learn about different time periods and cultures (Brittain, 2022), it is also important to consider whose stories are being told – or rather, not told. Dishearteningly, we are still seeing a lack of queer representation in the YA historical genre. In this article, I explore some of the reasons why this might be the case. Then, I identify the narrative strategies used by three recent writers of queer YA historical fiction: Mackenzi Lee; Rachael Lippincott and Benjamin Alire Saenz, before setting out how my own creative practice is influenced by these strategies.

According to YA author Dahlia Adler, curator of the book blog *LGBTQreads.com*, only around 50 YA historical titles with queer characters have been published since 2000 (Adler, 2023). While this list may not be exhaustive, based as it is on Adler's own reading as well as reader recommendations, her curation still draws attention to a lack of representation in a genre in which solid publishing data is hard to access. Where representation does exist, it is heavily skewed towards gay, lesbian or bisexual characters, with other groups in the LGBTQ+ community, such as asexual, transgender and non-binary people, only featuring in a handful of stories (Lewis, 2015). The lack of non-binary representation in particular is surprising, given that many young people now adopt gender identities beyond the traditional binary (Clark, Veale, Greyson and Saewyc, 2018).

 Additionally, where queer characters are present, they more often serve in secondary roles, rather than being protagonists. While some progress on this has been made since the 1990s, tropes such as the 'gay best friend' (a queer character whose main function is to help the non-queer protagonist on their journey without getting a storyline of their own, (Staples, 2021)) remain. For example, Gita Trelease's *Enchantée* duology (2019-2021), a YA series set during the French Revolution, does include a gay couple, but their romance takes decidedly second place to the main heterosexual love story, and they mostly serve as sidekicks to the protagonist.

So, there is a paucity of LGBTQ+ representation in YA historical fiction in general, and what representation does exist skews toward more mainstream identities or may be present only in secondary roles. There are a number of factors which have contributed to this situation, but there are also a number of potential strategies that can be harnessed by writers who want to work outside these common parameters.

The range of books published for young people is to a large degree shaped by the publishing industry and their willingness to support queer stories. In the UK, that willingness has historically been severely curtailed by the legal landscape, namely Section 28 (a law in effect between 1988-2000 which prohibited the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools). However, in addition to the lack of publishing support, writers of queer YA historical fiction have also faced material difficulties in telling queer stories.

Queer historian Hannah McElhinney (2023) explains that the lack of representation we see in literature stems from a historical erasure of queerness. Queer people's ways of living and loving were often seen as threatening to a heterosexual and patriarchal society, so their stories have been, and in some situations still are, suppressed and pushed to the fringes. According to McElhinney, it is a question of power, of who is seen as deserving to be a part of the dominant historical narrative and who is not. She claims that "the way history is presented says as much about the person telling the story and the time in which it is told as it does about the people and times that feature in it" (McElhinney, 2023, p.6).

As a consequence of this historical erasure, there is a lack of primary sources documenting queerness, which then impacts the range of LGBTQ+ stories available for us to retell with a confident historical foundation. Researcher Elliot Freeman (2023) conducted a study into the archiving of queer documents and concluded that many sources were either not created in the first place due to the need for queer people to be covert about their identities, or, where they did exist, they were often destroyed or else heavily coded and edited. Official sources, such as court records, may be more explicit about queer identities (Freeman, 2023), but most of them refer to gay identities with terms like "sodomite" or "buggery". Terms such as "transgender" and "bisexual", however, did not exist until more recently, so are absent from the record. Of course, an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. As Freeman points out, trans people might easily disappear from the records, as in the 19th century, it was possible to change one's name without this ever being reflected in official records (p.457). However, while court records can be a useful source for researchers to see that queer people did exist, one has to bear in mind that they are often written from what Freeman calls "the perspective of the oppressor" (p.448) and thus tend to paint a negative and sensationalising picture of queerness. What determines the survival or non-survival of a source is "not simply a matter of identity and audience", according to researchers Juhasz and Kerr (2020, quoted in Freeman 2023, p. 449), rather, "it is about the infrastructures of history and historiography: who creates and accesses the archive, who has both the time and desire to examine the past through material artefacts" (p. 449). In other words, people of a more privileged background or a white ethnicity may have been better placed to conserve and explore the writings of queer people with similar privilege, and so more of their stories remain and are told. Furthermore, this might explain why there is an even greater paucity of stories remaining and retold about disabled queer people or queer people of colour.

As we have seen, there are methodological challenges involved in writing queer historical fiction and this, together with historical erasure of queerness, may prevent new work from appearing in this genre. As YA author Malinda Lo, author of the lesbian historical novel *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021), puts it, "the vast majority of fiction about queer women is contemporary because until recently, most people denied the fact that queer people even existed before modern times" (Lo, 2021, p.1).

But of course, they did exist, and their stories need to be told to challenge the mainstream historical narrative and offer an alternative view from a marginalised perspective. Sally Nicholls, author of *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* (2017), says about her story of lesbian suffragettes: "One thing I really realised researching this book is how much of our history is written by rich white men. It felt good to find other versions of history and tell them to a new audience." While this sort of revisionist narrative is often frowned upon because of the issues that come with imposing modern sensibilities onto the past, it can also be argued that we are not changing the narrative per se, but simply revealing aspects of it that were hidden and giving them the attention they deserve (Banner, 2021). If these stories are not told, we risk alienating queer readers. As YA author Daniel Older (cited in Dar, 2019, p.1) points out: "When a young reader simply can't find themselves in stories, they turn away. That's bad enough when we're talking about fantasy, but when we're telling kids the lie that their people played no role in the history of this country – that's a whole other level of erasure."

There are narrative strategies available to writers who wish to overcome the challenges in order to reveal these hidden histories. It is to these strategies that I now turn. In doing so, I draw on the *Gentleman's Guide* series by Mackenzi Lee (2017-2021), *Pride and Prejudice and the City* by Rachael Lippincott (2023) and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Saenz. Based on the analysis of these works, I argue that the ideal nuanced strategy achieves a delicate balance between being true to the real events of the period while not offending modern readers' sensibilities. Finally, I demonstrate how I have attempted to achieve this balance in my own creative work.

The first strategy I examine is what I have termed the 'queer joy' approach used by Mackenzi Lee in her bestselling *Gentleman's Guide* series (2017-2021), which has often been praised for its representation of a wide variety of queer and racial identities. Lee believes in writing uplifting, intersectional queer stories, and while her characters aren't based on real historical people, she grounds them in historical reality and logic. For example, the character of Percy, who is a Black musician, is representative of the many Black people who contributed to society and culture in 18th-century Europe, the time Lee is writing about. Lee wants to show that "there have been moments in history when queer people were able to be visible" (Lee, cited in Dar, 2019, p.2). As her inspiration for Monty and Percy, who, in the book, build their lives together, she cites the story of Charity and Sylvia, two women in colonial America who openly lived together and even had a marriage ceremony of sorts. By inventing queer people who survived and thrived in their times, inspired by the extant cases available,

Lee aims to help young queer readers see that they are part of a long tradition and that it is possible to live a fulfilled life even when faced with external obstacles. She says that being queer in a past era didn't necessarily mean living a bleak and depressing life and was impacted by other factors besides sexuality, again drawing on the importance of intersectionality: "Just like today, it [the queer experience] varied between people, based on their jobs, gender identity, religion, race etc., but this individuality isn't often granted to people in history" (Lee, 2023, 5:00).

YA author Melanie Gillman, who was also interviewed for Dar's article, echoes this sentiment, saying, "the timeline is a little messier than a lot of people believe it is [...] and there were more cases than one would expect of queer and trans people who were happy and well adjusted" (Gillman, cited in Dar, 2019, p.1). Gillman cites the example of Anne Lister, a Yorkshire landowner in the 19th century, who was open about her relationships with women, but nonetheless ran a flourishing coal business. It is important to bear in mind, however, referring back to Lee's point about intersectionality, that Lister enjoyed the privileges associated with being white and wealthy. Thus, she was more freely able to live her sexual identity in a way that might not have been available to people from lower social classes or a different ethnicity.

Nonetheless, every example of a historic queer person openly embracing their sexual and gender identity can serve as a great encouragement to young readers and help them feel less alone. Knowing your history can help you understand where you come from and who you want to be. As queer historian Hugh Ryan (2023) puts it, "We look to histories of our own people to understand better our own place in the world, to not feel like a singular freak or someone who makes no sense without history or community". Mackenzi Lee (2021, p.1), compares this type of fiction to "a lighthouse" that can give readers a safe space to explore their own identity and to see that alternatives to the mainstream are possible. She explains, "sometimes it takes seeing yourself in someone else before you recognise your own reflection." With this view, she usefully expands on Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) seminal metaphor of 'mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors', which posits that in-groups can easily find themselves in fiction, but readers also need to see out-groups and experience the stories of out-groups.

The idea of being inspired by stories from the past dates back much further than Ryan or Lee. It was first developed by American literary critic Van Wyck Brooks in 1918, who coined the term "useable past" to refer to the idea that the lessons we learn from the past can guide our experience of the present and future. But while it is doubtlessly positive to see that historical people struggled with many of the same things that we do today, it is problematic to assume these people were exactly like us. In doing so, we are not only imposing our modern standards onto a time in which they didn't exist, we are also flattening out differences across different times and cultures. Not all people at all times in all places had the exact same experience of queerness. Hugh Ryan (2023) argues that:

[...] there are always going to be rules and identities, but changes over time are not set in stone. We take the raw material of desire in the body and manipulate it through our culture to produce who we are. And that's why it can be so different for people in different time periods and places, even for people in the same time and place but in very different cultural communities. It's not that sexuality, gender, and sex aren't real, but that everything we do with them is socially constructed.

Therefore, we need to be cautious with extrapolating out from extant examples of 'queer joy' in the historical record and using them to inspire too broad an experience.

The second approach towards writing queer historical characters that I examine is what I term the 'romanticising approach' used by Rachael Lippincott in her 2023 novel *Pride and Prejudice and the City*. As the title suggests, it combines historical and contemporary plot lines, and is essentially a lesbian time-travel romance between Audrey (from 2020s America) and Lucy (who lives in England during the Regency era). Even when accounting for the fantastical element, many aspects of the storyline take an overly beautified view of the past. Apart from Lucy's conservative father, the couple's social milieu universally accepts them, and the two characters also discuss their sexualities with a frankness that I assume would have been unthought of for most people at the time. Representing historical queerness in this way tilts the balance too far towards catering to modern readers and doesn't take into account how difficult it would have been for someone to be in a queer relationship in the Regency era, in my opinion. While Lippincott does have the characters refer to the homophobic attitudes of the time, we never see them on the page, which makes it hard for readers to understand their full impact. The ending of the book demonstrates an understanding that readers are likely to hold, that the modern era would offer women of this class a more comfortable existence, and so the characters settle in 2023. Thus, Lippincott indirectly claims that only in our modern, 'enlightened' era, are queer people free to live authentically, while never showing us any evidence of queerphobia in the past she describes. Lippincott's approach, then, is a mixture of beautifying the past and passing judgement on it from a modern standpoint, both of which I, as an author, would want to avoid in my own work. A happy ending in this case is one in which the historic is rejected altogether. And while an unhappy ending might have been plausible, it wouldn't have been appropriate for the genre (Monroe, 2020) and would go against Lippincott's own representation of a romanticised past; it is understandable why the author didn't choose this option.

It seems paradoxical to suggest an unhappy ending as an option authors can take in a queer story. After all, we have seen too many stories that end with the tired trope of "bury your gays", with one of the partners in a same-sex relationship dying at the end, which was historically used as a way for writers to escape repercussions for 'endorsing homosexuality' (Hulan, 2017). And of course, we need novels that show readers that queer people could and did fight back against the constraints of their lives,

demanding and claiming their right to live and love freely. But sometimes, an unhappy ending is simply more reflective of historical reality (Love, 2009) and authors should not shy away from showing readers the often bleak truth of oppression and queerphobia. While this did not affect all queer people equally, depending on their race, class or gender (Freeman, 2023), for many, it was part of their daily lives, and we are doing their experiences a disservice if we sugarcoat the truth to make it more palatable to a modern audience. However, I also feel that we need to be careful not to demonise our historical characters who are intolerant or unaccepting of queerness. They are, like all people, products of their time, and we need to understand how their backgrounds shaped their views. Sally Nicholls echoes this idea, stating that "a group of Suffragettes or art students are going to have a very different view of the world to a group of bankers or a women's institute" (Nicholls, 2023, p.2). So even if the actions of some characters seem offensive by modern standards, they may not have been perceived as such in their time and social environment (Lee, 2021). Again, it is a balancing act between making sure modern readers can relate to our characters and not straying too far from historical facts.

The third author whose work I examine, Benjamin Alire Saenz, who wrote the bestselling YA novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe (*2012*)*, achieves this balance excellently, in my opinion. It may have helped that his book is set in the 1980s, a time period which he experienced himself (according to historical fiction author Shelley Parker Chan (2021), lived experience can be helpful in writing about a historical period). But mostly, Saenz's queer representation is so convincing because he uses what I call a 'chiaroscuro' approach: he shows us both sides of the queer experience, the light and the dark. Unlike Lippincott, he does not shy away from showing us the consequences of historical homophobia, as Dante, one of the protagonists, is beaten and assaulted for kissing a boy. But he also shows how queer people can find support in their romantic relationships and from the people around them. Dante's parents, who are accepting of his homosexuality in a quiet, unobtrusive way, are a realistic and uplifting example of how parents can be allies to their queer children. But although the novel is, at its core, a love story between two boys, Saenz doesn't get too caught up in questions of terminology, as Aristotle never labels his sexual identity. Instead, as researcher Cady Lewis says in her 2015 study of *Aristotle and Dante*, this is a story about not only "discovering one's sexuality, but also simply about discovering one's identity as a whole."

It is this chiaroscuro strategy that I draw upon most strongly in my own YA historical novel, *Love and Liberty*, which is set in Paris during the student rebellion of June 1832. I want it to be a story that openly and honestly explores my protagonist, Adrien's, journey of discovering and exploring their nonbinary identity, without ever using that label in the text, as there is no evidence that the word existed at the time in either French or English. To make sure I wasn't using anachronistic terminology and to gain an understanding of how people conceptualised gender and sexuality at the time I am writing about, I did extensive research. I am most indebted to Merrick and Sibalis'

(2002) and Thompson's (1996) work on homosexuality in 19th-century France and Linton's (2022) and Mesch's (2020) work on nonbinary and trans narratives in French history.

But it is important to remember that research can only take you so far. I think when in doubt, it is always better not to get caught up in assigning a label to a character and instead focus on how they feel and experience their identity. Mackenzi Lee echoes this sentiment, stating that while the terminology might not have existed yet, people nonetheless experienced queer love and had the self-awareness to reflect on this: "Even before people had that vocabulary or that understanding of sexuality, they knew their own hearts" (Lee, cited in Dar, 2019, p.1).

While Adrien's discovery of their identity is doubtlessly important in the novel, I also want to write a story that goes beyond just that. Adrien's falling in love, their political convictions and their challenge of societal norms is just as important to the overall plot, and I want to reflect that. Drawing on Saenz's example, I also include an element of darkness, showing queerphobic and intolerant characters, as well as the challenge of having to conceal a queer identity, as despite being legal, same-sex relationships still weren't widely socially accepted to the best of the historical evidence. But to counteract the darker parts, I want hope as well, referring back to Lee's idea of queer joy. My characters thrive in spite of, or perhaps because of, their queerness, forming bonds of acceptance and love, romantic and platonic, and giving each other the support they so often lack from the outside world. But of course, while I tried to make my writing as factually accurate as possible, my novel is first and foremost a work of fiction, and I have taken liberties with the historical facts where it served the story. In fact, I would argue that in the balance between the factual truth and the emotional truth, it is always better to err on the side of emotion. Maybe this is where we as authors can allow ourselves a little anachronism: not by violating historical facts or presenting the past as more beautiful than it was, but in giving ourselves the freedom to write about characters exploring their queer identities even when there are no obvious historical examples for us to base them on.

A strategy of chiaroscuro offers me – and ultimately the young readers of my work – a balance between detail and imagination, hope and the truth of historical oppression. In the words of celebrated lesbian author Sarah Waters (cited in Mitchell, 2013, p.130), "all historical fiction is a balance between the real and the fictive." We must not rely on either side too heavily, slipping into romanticising the past or sticking so rigidly to detail that it swamps the story. The three authors whose strategies I have explored in this essay have all found their own ways of approaching this, some perhaps more useful as a guide for creative practice than others. But the important thing is that, whatever the limitations of their stories, they had the courage to write them, to give young readers the representation they so urgently need to better understand themselves and the generations of queer people who came before them. I encourage us all as authors, queer or not, to find this courage for ourselves, to be brave enough to

challenge our preconceptions about history and the role that queer people played in it. To close, I once again cite Mackenzi Lee (2017, 20:00):

> As long as we have had people, we have had queer people and we have had queer people who make their lives work and who live on their own terms and have fulfilled and happy sexual and romantic lives and people they love. I don't think that's an anachronism. And we need to banish the idea that it is.

Queer people's stories have always existed. Now it is up to us to tell them.

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