LEAF JOURNAL

Baker, Jo. ‘How to Write Queer Antagonists in YA Fiction Without Making Queerness a Signifier for Evil’. *Leaf Journal*, Volume 4, Issue 1, Jul 2026.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58091/hzyv-9195
URL: https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/lj/index

How to Write Queer Antagonists in YA Fiction Without Making Queerness a Signifier for Evil

Jo Baker

Abstract
In the past few years, LGBTQIA+ representation in children’s and young adult literature has markedly improved, both in terms of quantity and quality of portrayal. This article analyses two recent queer books, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily M. Danforth and the first *Heartstopper* graphic novel by Alice Oseman, to unpick how to write a queer antagonist without reverting to harmful stereotypes and tropes. Both books are written by queer authors and have a brilliant and nuanced rainbow of queer representation. The proliferation of queerness in both books and the shared struggle against internalised homophobia prevent the antagonists’ sexuality from becoming a metaphor for evil. Additionally, both antagonists are set within a larger antagonistic force or system.

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

*

> Representation is so important, both for teens who are themselves LGBT and also for others to gain more empathy and understanding.
>
> *Book Trust*

Introduction

IN *REPRESENTING THE Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*, Jenkins and Cart (2018) trace the evolution of LGBTQIA+ representation in Young Adult (YA) fiction. They argue that since 1969 there has been a “constant progression of LGBTQ+ themes” (Lachaîne, 2019, p.3) and that contemporary narratives offer greater plot diversity, more nuanced and realistic storylines, and complex characters – in novels often crafted by authors who are themselves part of the LGBTQIA+ community. The era of stereotypical portrayals, where queer characters were doomed to die tragically or live unhappily in perpetual loneliness, has thankfully begun to fade (Jenkins and Cart, 2018, xii).

In this essay, I discuss the stereotype of queerness as evil (Young, 2022), including exploring how to write a queer antagonist in YA fiction without making their queerness a signifier for evil. Throughout the article, I use the terms queer and queerness both to refer to “having a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to, or that challenges, traditional (esp. heteronormative) ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms” (Oxford University Press, n.d.) and as an inclusive umbrella term similar to LGBT, LGBTQIA, etc. In the past – sometimes the not-so-distant past – literature and film often portrayed villains as queer, or imbued them with queer-coded traits, to heighten their perceived monstrousness.

Hollywood has a long and chequered history with this, from Ursula in Disney’s animated *The Little Mermaid* (Musker and Clements, 1989), whose character and design drew from drag performer Divine (Brown, 2021), to the murderous cross-dressing Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991).

Children’s literature has a history of this too. For instance, many of Roald Dahl’s villains are queer coded, such as *Matilda*’s Miss Trunchbull, the “gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of the pupils and teachers alike” (1988, p.61) and whose size, athleticism, aggression and dominance subvert gender norms, and Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker in *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), two gaudy, unmarried women whose cruelty to James subverts feminine norms (Delgado-Herrera et al., 2024). The White Witch in C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) is powerful, authoritative and uninterested in maternal or nurturing roles, and Captain Hook in J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1911) has been read as queer coded due to his theatricality and flamboyant gestures. In more recent YA fiction, Meg Rosoff’s homewrecking Kit Godden in *The Great Godden* (2020) exemplifies the stereotype of the duplicitous bisexual (Covington, 2021; Lo, 2010).

These antagonists are either explicitly queer or queer coded, a term that refers to characters who exhibit queer traits without being explicitly identified as queer. When queerness is used to amplify a villain’s unsettling or monstrous nature, it risks positioning sexual or gender identity as a marker of moral deviance (Brown, 2021).

As Huw Lemmey and Ben Miller argue in *Bad Gays: A Homosexual History* (2022), the lives of villainous queers are as culturally significant as those of our heroes. Queer people should not have to be virtuous to be acceptable, but a character's queerness should be incidental to their villainy, not its cause. Therefore it is important to me as an LGBTQIA+ writer to depict members of my community as complex and nuanced individuals – as good, bad and everything in between. As the epigraph to this article states, representation matters (Book Trust, 2024).

To explore this, I examine two YA novels featuring queer antagonists, both also written by queer authors (Danforth, 2013; Knight, 2022). I selected these texts based on the assumption that LGBTQIA+ writers are more likely to approach queer villainy with sensitivity and nuance. Both novels have received critical acclaim: Emily M. Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) was listed among Amazon and Kirkus's Best Teen Books of 2012 and was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in LGBT Children's/YA, while *Heartstopper: Volume 1* (2018) by Alice Oseman won the YA Book Prize, and Oseman's wider body of work has been recognised with a nomination for the prestigious Carnegie Medal and at the Inky Awards and the Goodreads Choice Awards.

I begin by deconstructing Reverend Rick in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. He is a principled and likeable character who describes himself as having been "a teenager who struggled with homosexual desire" (p.209), but who also carries out harmful 'conversion therapy' at God's Promise, teaching teenagers how to disavow and suppress any sexuality and gender divergence from the heteronorm. As such, he embodies a homophobic and transphobic belief system that is both objectively damaging (Trevor Project, 2022, p.3) as well as personally abhorrent to me as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

In contrast, *Heartstopper*'s Ben is more overtly harmful. He sexually assaults protagonist Charlie, remains unrepentant and seeks to continue their secret encounters without acknowledging the harm he causes. I analyse how Oseman portrays Ben's harmful behaviour without conflating his queerness with his abusive behaviour.

I argue that both novels successfully disentangle queerness from villainy through several key strategies: they present explicitly queer antagonists within queer-centric worlds; they include central characters undergoing parallel queer journeys; and they depict homophobia as the overarching antagonistic force. These elements prevent the antagonist's queerness from being read as a signifier of their wrongdoing.

I intend to apply these insights to my own work-in-progress – a queer YA folk horror novel – where I aim to portray my queer hero/antihero with complexity, care and integrity.

Analysis: *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*

The Miseducation of Cameron Post is a "coming-of-gayge" (Danforth, 2018) novel set in rural Montana in the mid-1990s. Spanning protagonist Cameron's life from ages 12 to 15, the novel follows her discovery of her sexuality in the wake of her parents' sudden death and her subsequent placement at God's Promise – a conversion therapy facility co-run by 'ex-gay' Reverend Rick and his sister Lydia. The centre is framed as "a Christian school and outreach centre for adolescents yearning to break free from the bonds of sexual sin and confusion by welcoming Jesus Christ into their lives" (p.252).

Reverend Rick: A Queer Antagonist?

Reverend Rick travels the country sharing his testimony of overcoming same-sex attraction through devotion to Christ (p.206). He is the first openly queer person Cam encounters, and as such, risks being read as a queer antagonist whose queerness is entangled with harm. His role at God's Promise – where he counsels vulnerable teens towards heteronomativity – positions him as a perpetrator of institutional violence.

Yet Danforth complicates this reading. Rick is described as a "shy kind of artsy-poet" with "a genuine sort of smile" (p.208). Cam herself admits, "I liked Rick. He was kind and calm" (p.296). He is portrayed as sincere, compassionate and deeply committed to his work at God's Promise: "He so believed in what he was doing, what we were doing, whatever it was" (p.295). Rick is presented as a man "not smarmy like a televangelist" (p.207), but one of quiet conviction: "'We don't really use the word cure so much,' Rick says. 'We help teens come to Christ […] and it's that relationship that helps people escape these kinds of unwanted desires'" (p.206).

In Rick we can see someone who is causing real harm despite caring deeply about the people he is trying to help. His rejection of his own sexuality can be understood as a survival strategy – an attempt to reconcile two irreconcilable imperatives: the need to remain connected to his faith and community, and the desire to live authentically. Danforth, through Cam, holds him accountable for the damage he causes, yet also allows us to see his internal conflict. Rick is both victim and perpetrator, having internalised the toxic homophobia of Bible Belt America.

Through Cam, Danforth shows us there *are* other choices available to Rick, even though the path Cam takes – to leave everything she knows behind and set off for the big city with her collection of queer friend-survivors – is not an easy one (p.455). But by allowing Cam to make different choices to Rick, Danforth prevents Rick's queer identity from becoming a signifier for evil.

Externalising the Antagonistic Force

Importantly, Danforth situates both Cam and Rick's characters within a broader heteronormative and homophobic culture (pp.10–11,152), a culture reinforced by church teachings (p.99). By externalising the antagonistic force like this, Danforth powerfully locates him as a victim of the very same homophobic ideology that keeps Cam encased in shame and guilt. This conflict is echoed in Lindsey's warning to Cam:

"Pining after straight girls […] when you live in a town filled with angry, Bible-pounding, probably gun-toting cowboys is a total no-win" (p.138).

Rick's queerness is thus what might engender the reader to feel compassion for him, even as he perpetuates the harmful narrative that it is desirable – or even possible – to become 'ex-gay', which makes him complicit in the harm done to his queer community. This combination of victim and perpetrator encourages a real complexity of feeling in our response to Rick and means that his queerness cannot be a signifier for his evil.

The Fallout

As Cam in *Miseducation* notes, "sometimes you can end up really messing somebody up because the way you're trying to supposedly help them is really messed up" (p.399), which is a tidy summation of Rick's actions and character throughout the novel. For all his belief, authenticity and kindness, Rick is perpetrating real damage to the young people he so wants to help. Conversion therapy is well documented to cause extreme harm to young people who have either engaged in or been coerced into it, including substance abuse, depression, anxiety and suicide attempts (Trevor Project, 2022, p.3).

We see this most clearly when fellow God's Promise disciple Mark, unable to be the masculine son that his father so wants, breaks down after a visit home. One night, after a difficult group 'therapy' session, Mark attempts to slice off his own penis with a razor, then pours bleach on the wound (p.380). Self-harm is a well-known response to emotional distress, and particularly common in teenagers (Rahman et al., 2021, p1). However, we don't need to be therapists to draw the obvious parallel, as fellow disciple Adam does, between Mark being sent by his family to God's Promise to 'heal' his sexuality (p.253), and his attempt to cut off his penis (p.389), which could be read as Mark literally attempting to cut off his sexuality. As ever, Cam puts it far better than me: "The whole fucking purpose of this place is to make us hate ourselves so we change" (p.400).

After Mark has been taken to hospital, Rick goes to each disciple's room to talk one-on-one about what happened. Cam is finally openly furious with him, saying "You guys don't even know what you're doing here, do you? […] You don't know how to fix this. You should just say that: 'We fucked it up'" (p.382).

Rick listens calmly until he begins to cry "quietly" and without hiding his face, and tells Cam he doesn't know how to answer her. He looks so vulnerable that even Cam cannot help but give him a hug (p.383). Danforth again invites a complex response: Rick is clearly deeply shaken, yet remains unable to reckon with the full consequences of his actions.

If Rick were the protagonist this would perhaps be his "dark night of the soul" moment (Snyder, 2005, pp.88–90). It is at this crucial moment that Rick could learn from this awful incident and finally see the error of his ways, but instead he suppresses his self-doubt back into his faith in Christ and we feel the moment splinter as Cam

understands that he will always find a way to justify his choices (p.383). Indeed, Storr posits that it can be so very painful to break down our view of the world that many cannot, and suggests that it is therefore the job of a story's hero to face her flaws and thus change herself (2019, p.63). But Rick cannot and thus, well meaning as he is, he must be confirmed as the villain of this piece.

Conclusion

Danforth resists reductive portrayals by presenting Rick as both victim and perpetrator – someone who has internalised the homophobic ideology of evangelical Christianity and who genuinely believes he is helping the adolescents in his care, despite causing them great harm, as we see with Mark. By externalising the novel's primary antagonistic force as the wider heteronormative and religious culture of rural Montana in this way, Danforth prevents Rick's queerness from being linked to his harmful behaviour.

Moreover, Rick is situated within a range of queer representation, so he is not the only example of queerness in this book, which means that he is not in danger of being the sole representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in this world. Danforth gives Cam a closely linked journey by presenting her with the same dilemma – to disavow either her queerness or her community – thus disentangling Rick's queerness from the harm he causes to those he is trying to help.

Analysis: *Heartstopper: Volume 1*

As Oseman writes in the author's note of *Heartstopper: Volume 2*, "Everyone deserves the time, space and support to figure out their feelings and their identity." (Oseman, 2019, p.576). *Heartstopper: Volume 1* follows the love story of rugby-playing Nick Nelson and sweet nerd Charlie Spring. At the beginning of the graphic novel, Charlie is unhappily in a secret relationship with closeted and abusive Ben Hope who also, we later find out, has a rather public girlfriend.

The struggle at the heart of the book is Nick's coming-out to himself, and the consequent will-they-won't-they tension between Nick and Charlie. Oseman uses both Nick's unfurling realisation about his queerness and Ben's treatment of Charlie to beautifully explore the effect that such secrecy can have on the other person involved, while also holding her ground that we owe nobody an explanation of our sexuality. This is a skilful line to walk, and one I think she can only navigate successfully in the context of the contrast between Nick and Ben.

Nick confronts a similar situation to Ben in many ways: both are popular Year-11 boys who move in the same circles; both date or have dated girls; and both have a romantic/sexual connection with Charlie. Oseman even draws them similarly, making both tall, blond and handsome, although Nick's face is softer and Ben's more angular (p.37).

Neither Nick nor Ben is 'out' at the beginning of the novel, and Oseman creates a steady background hum of environmental homophobia (pp.99,111,204,223). Both

characters therefore have complicated feelings about coming out, such as Ben's intense fear of anyone finding out about him and Charlie (pp.27,76), reinforced by the presence of Ben's girlfriend, who he is completely happy to be seen in public with, leading us to infer – within the presence of other markers of internalised homophobia – a devaluation of Ben's same-sex attraction to Charlie. Oseman also depicts Nick struggling with internalised homophobia (p.192), although, unlike Ben, she shows the joy he finds in his connection with Charlie as the story unfolds (pp.168–175), and in *Heartstopper: Volume 2* (2019) the pair finally become a couple.

As I explore in my analysis below, Oseman capitalises on these 'same but different' facets of Ben and Nick, using the pair as foils for each other, linking and contrasting them in the novel many times over in order to portray each more vividly (Milhorn, 2006, p.219) but also in a way that holds Ben responsible for his own destructive choices. Unlike the queer antagonists of old (Brown, 2021) Ben is not alone in his queerness in this novel. Therefore, when we see Ben treating Charlie cruelly, culminating in him sexually assaulting Charlie, we are prevented from automatically linking his queerness to his harmful actions, because there are other examples of characters processing their internalised homophobia in a way that does not harm others.

Meeting Ben

In this section, I will explore Oseman's introduction of Ben, how she lays out Ben and Charlie's situation and how she then contrasts Ben's cruel treatment of Charlie with Nick's kindness. She establishes Ben as a coercive and abusive individual, who – unlike Reverend Rick – we are not invited to empathise with. Nick's character is an important foil to Ben's, as it is through his presence and consistent kindness that Oseman critiques Ben's behaviour, rather than Ben's sexuality.

We meet Ben even before we meet Charlie, by means of a text exchange (p.1). All the messages are short and describe meeting in rooms at school, and there are no messages over the Christmas holidays – including on Christmas Day – which induces an uneasy sense of transactionality to these assignations.

In one of these meetings (p.2), the illustrations support the sense that Ben is not a safe presence. Standing underneath the Library's "*Shhhh*" sign, Ben is drawn as physically bigger than Charlie. Half of Charlie's pained face is visible behind the back of Ben's head, creating a feeling of claustrophobia. The tick-tick-tick of the clock heightens the uneasiness. However, the boys are kissing, lending ambiguity to the scene, which continues into the next page. This scene could be read as showing Ben as a *lover* wanting to prolong contact. However, there is an expression of warning on Ben's face, and Charlie is looking away unhappily, out of the frame (p.2). Ben's black jacket looms against Charlie's slight frame.

Finally, on the next page (p.4), we see Charlie looking sad, with a 'sigh' in frame, and the door and area of the library is shaded, perhaps to indicate the heaviness of the

situation with Ben. There is hope too, as Charlie is in a lightened area, which enlarges in the second frame as he moves away from Ben.

William C. Carroll, Professor of English Literature at Boston University, argues that Shakespeare's language constructs character from the 'outside in'. He quotes Henry Peacham's words that description should be "a likely show of life, but also by *outward countenance of the inward spirit and affection*" (emphasis added by Carroll) (2001, p.90). Thus description should not only show what a person or thing looks like, but should also show something of the inner life, the "inward spirit and affection".

Oseman uses a similar technique in her drawings to hint at Ben's character, such as Ben looming over Charlie; Ben's dark jacket; the fact that he is still kissing Charlie, despite Charlie's obvious uneasiness; the darkness of the frames; and Ben's warning look when Charlie wants to leave. This shows us not only the dynamics of their relationship, but also by placing them underneath the *"Shhhh"* sign in the library, itself a place of hushed quiet, we begin to link their connection with enforced silence. Oseman's depiction of these characters is multifaceted and thus includes the "penetration, analysis and representation" that Carroll argues Shakespeare was so skilled in.

Moreover, I can't help but feel that the journey from ambiguity to understanding is carefully controlled by Oseman. In these opening pages, the reader is led on an emotional journey that mirrors Charlie's own: what initially registers as something subtly 'off' gradually kaleidoscopes into awareness that Ben does not treat Charlie well. This produced in me a sense of empathy for Charlie, and is a powerfully subtle method of *showing and not telling* us what has happened; it is sparse and clear and not a frame is wasted (Bell and Magrs, 2019, p.46).

This is followed immediately by Charlie walking into the classroom and seeing Nick for the first time. Nick is looking into a bright expanse, surrounded by lightness (p.8). After Nick has been introduced, the shading in Nick's pages is much lighter than in Ben's, and initially each frame takes up a whole page (p.10–11), which feels spacious and light. We then find ourselves in a sweet exchange between Charlie and Nick about Nick's fountain pen, and Charlie helps Nick wash off the ink in the bathroom (p.16–17). Nick and Charlie are laughing and smiling, but an abusive text from Ben splits the warmth (p.19), giving a powerful felt-sense contrast between Ben's implied sexual coercion and the warm feeling of Charlie's budding romance with Nick, both sparking empathy for Charlie and making it clear that it is Ben's coercion and abusiveness – rather than his queerness – that is at fault.

Oseman uses interruptions – both Nick interrupting a moment between Ben and Charlie, and Ben interrupting a moment between Nick and Charlie – to great effect throughout the novel, such as when a text from Ben interrupts a sweet moment when Charlie and Nick are laughing together (p.19), or when Nick interrupts an argument between Ben and Charlie and then provides much-needed kindness afterwards (p.37).

The Assault

In the scene where Ben assaults Charlie (p.79), the effect of seeing Charlie's face – his eyes full of tears and confusion, saying, "Don't!" and "Stop it!" – while Ben forcibly kisses him, saying, "But you're so hot when you're angry" and "Come on Charlie, I really like you", is truly sickening.

In this scene, Ben displays cognitive distortions common to sex offenders such as "claiming the right or entitlement to the behavior, and blaming the victim" (Faupel, 2015, p.2). In saying, "Come on Charlie, I really like you" (p.79), he also speaks from the myth that rape emerges from the "lust, desire, sexual attraction or sexual orientation of the abuser" (RSVP, 2018, p.1). Instead, sexual violence is driven by a need or desire or "violence, anger, power and control over another person" (RSVP, 2018, p.1). Evidence indicates that such cognitive distortions in offenders often underpins sexually abusive behavior (Faupel, 2015, p.2).

Therefore, Ben is portrayed as a sexual perpetrator *as well as* and *separately from* someone who is conflicted about his sexuality. In contrast, Nick is also conflicted about his sexuality, but does not sexually assault Charlie. Oseman's Ben can be understood as a complex and contradictory – and therefore well-drawn – character (Bradbury, 2019, p111).

In the next spread (p.84–85), Oseman uses the layout of the page and the characters' facial expressions to again highlight both the similarities and differences between Nick and Ben. Charlie and Nick stand together opposite Ben, with Ben looming over Charlie. Ben looks angrily towards the reader and, it is assumed, towards Charlie, while Nick looks worriedly at Charlie, who is crying. Furthermore, Ben and Nick are placed in similar but opposing spots on the page: Ben in the top-left corner and Nick in the top-right corner. All of this combines to clearly contrast Nick and Ben's treatment of Charlie.

Later that night, Nick sends the following messages to Charlie:

> You can talk to me about it if you want?
> Sounds like a pretty serious situation
> But you don't have to
> If you don't want to
> But I am your friend and I do care (p.108)

Oseman shows that Nick wants to support Charlie, but he is also respectful of Charlie's privacy and autonomy. This contrasts starkly with Ben forcing himself on Charlie in the previous pages. This both highlights and critiques Ben's overriding of Charlie's boundaries, and gives Charlie – and the reader – a safe and kind place to be after the sexual assault.

Later, Nick invites Charlie to his house (p.127) and to hang out together (p.135), and their growing physicality is sweet and gentle and full of blushing and laughter (p.172–173). This is in direct contrast to Ben, who kept Charlie separate from the rest

of his life. Oseman depicts Nick and Charlie's budding queer attraction as beautiful and gentle, showing us that Ben's sexual coercion – despite his objections to the contrary – is not the same thing at all.

Conclusion

As in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, Ben's queer antagonist is one of a number of queer characters in *Heartstopper.* Oseman links the characters of Ben and Nick throughout the book, illuminating contrasting forms of queer masculinity and relational ethics. Nick's arrival brings lightness and emotional spaciousness. His gentle interactions with Charlie and his respectful response to Charlie's trauma offer a steadying counterpoint to Ben's sexual abuse of Charlie. Ben is portrayed as coercive and abusive, while Nick embodies warmth, respect and emotional safety. This contrast means that Oseman critiques Ben's actions without conflating his queerness with his harmful behaviour.

As well as being sexually abusive, Ben can be read as wrestling with his own internalised homophobia, making it hard for him to live his sexuality authentically in the world, which makes him – in the same way as Reverend Rick – a victim as well as a perpetrator.

Conclusion

Contemporary YA fiction is beginning to move beyond the long-standing trope in which queerness is coded as villainy. In the past, in popular media such as film or books, queer characteristics or behaviours were often used to amplify or signify evil in antagonists. A queer identity was used metaphorically as a villainous identity. As a writer, I want to include queer villains, but I don't want them to be villainous because they are queer; their queerness is an incidental aspect of their identity.

In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*'s Reverend Rick, we are even encouraged to see a good guy, and thus sympathise with his plight, even as we are shown vividly the harm he has done. We are therefore further encouraged to understand him as a queer victim of his homophobic environment, one who does harm because of the choices he makes. *Heartstopper*'s Ben has little to redeem him, but the contrasting presence of Nick provides a powerful critique to Ben's way of being in the world.

In this essay, I analysed two contemporary YA texts with queer villains written without linking their queerness to their villainy. These authors have succeeded in detaching queerness and villainy because:

1. The antagonist is set within a rainbow of queer representation.
2. When a queer character is portrayed as 'bad' in a way that relates to their sexuality, the story also includes at least one other queer character whose journey is closely connected, to avoid implying that queerness itself is the source of their 'badness'.

3. The antagonist is located within or victimised by a larger antagonistic force or system such as homophobia or evangelical Christianity.

I have only examined two texts, both of which show male, cis-gendered, white antagonists written by queer white women. It would be interesting to deconstruct novels by authors of other identities.

I have applied this learning in my own work-in-progress *Something Dead This Way Comes*, a YA folk horror for 14–17-year-olds. My protagonist, Grace, has loved her best friend Lissa for as long as she can remember. Losing her to an arranged marriage feels unbearable. So when a wolf-spider with one strange yellow eye emerges from the dirt and offers to rewrite their futures, Grace accepts – with predictably deadly consequences.

I set my novel in a regressive religious and patriarchal society of a mythic past, although Grace lives slightly on the edges of this system with her queer found family in the hills. Drawing on my learning from this essay, I both link and contrast Grace and Lissa and explore the very different ways in which they have internalised the norms of their environment, and also the ways in which they push back and find agency. I find myself writing with more freedom: allowing my characters to make destructive decisions, to behave selfishly, wrongheadedly, impulsively and even cruelly, as well as with kindness, loyalty, selflessness and profound love. In short, applying the understanding of queer characters examined in this essay allows me to lean into complexity and nuance in my writing.

In this moment, when LGBTQIA+ rights are under threat worldwide, particularly with transgender rights actively being rolled back in the UK, it feels particularly important to keep writing complex queer people living complex lives. In the end, the greatest evil in both *The Miseduction of Cameron Post* and *Heartstopper* was the dark spectre of homophobia and transphobia. That is the villainy our stories must continue to dismantle.

Works Cited

Barrie, J.M. (1911) *Peter Pan*. 2024 edition. London: Penguin Classics.
Bell, J. and Magrs, P. (eds.) (2019) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*. London: Macmillan.
Book Trust. (2024) *Teen and YA books with LGBT characters*. Available at: https://www.booktrust.org.uk/booklists/l/lgbt-ya/ (Accessed: 19 January 2024).
Bradbury, M. (2019) ‘Character and Characterization’, in Bell, J. and Magrs, P. (eds) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 111–125.
Brown, A. (2021) Hook, Ursula, and Elsa: Disney and Queer-coding from the 1950s to the 2010s. *The Macksey Journal*, 2, article 43.
Carroll, W.C. (2001) Description. In Adamson, S. (ed.). *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language: A Guide*. London: Arden Shakespeare, p. 89–101.
Covington, C. (2021) The Great Godden. [Review]. *School Library Journal*. Available at: https://www.slj.com/review/the-great-godden (Accessed: 29 September 2025).

Creed, B. (1993) *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
Dahl, R. (1961) *James and the Giant Peach*. 2007 edition. London: Puffin.
Dahl, R. (1988) *Matilda*. 2016 edition. London: Puffin.
Danforth, E.M. (2012) *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. 2017 edition. London: Penguin.
Danforth, E.M. (2013) Interview with Emily M. Danforth. *Once Upon a Bookcase*. Available at: https://www.onceuponabookcase.co.uk/2013/07/interview-with-emily-m-danforth.html (Accessed: 26 June 2026).
Danforth, E.M. (2018) Emily Danforth Q&A | Cameron Post, Conversion Therapy & Film Adaptations. *YouTube*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hVNYDZqhw0 (Accessed: 8 January 2024).
Delgado-Herrera, M., Aceves-Gómez, A.C. and Reyes-Aguilar, A. (2024) Relationship between gender roles, motherhood beliefs and mental health. *PLoS ONE*, 19(3), e0298750. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0298750.
Demme, J. (dir.) (1991) *The Silence of the Lambs*. [Feature film]. United States: Orion Pictures.
Faupel, S. (2015) Etiology of Adult Sexual Offending. Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Available at: https://smart.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh231/files/media/document/etiologyofadultsexualoffending.pdf (Accessed: 1 April 2026).
Lemmey, H. and Miller, B. (2022) *Bad Gays: A Homosexual History*. London: Verso.
Lewis, C.S. (1950) *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. 2023 edition. London: HarperCollins.
Jenkins, C.A. and Cart, M. (2018) *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield.
Knight, L. (2022) Heartstopper author Alice Oseman: 'If you don't have sex and romance, you feel like you haven't achieved'. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/nov/19/alice-oseman-author-heartstopper-sex-romance-asexuality (Accessed: 18 January 2024).
Lachaîne, C. (2019) Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart, Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969. [Review]. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 4, p. 1–4.
Lo, M. (2010) Avoiding LGBTQ Stereotypes in YA Fiction, Part 1: Major LGBTQ Stereotypes. [Blog post]. Available at: https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2010/06/avoiding-lgbtq-stereotypes-in-ya-fiction-part-1-major-lgbtq-stereotypes (Accessed: 29 September 2025).
Milhorn, T.H. (2006) *Writing Genre Fiction: A Guide to the Craft*. Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers.
Musker, J. and Clements, R. (dirs.) (1989) *The Little Mermaid*. [Feature film]. United States: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution.
Oseman, A. (2018) *Heartstopper: Volume 1*. 2019 edition. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
Oseman, A. (2019) *Heartstopper: Volume 2*. 2020 edition. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
Oxford University Press. (n.d.) Queer, adj.[1]. *Oxford English dictionary*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9610104456 (Accessed: 11 June 2026).

Rahman, F., Webb, R.T. and Wittkowski, A. (2021) Risk factors for self-harm repetition in adolescents: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 88, CDI102048. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2021.102048.
Rape and Sexual Violence Project (RSVP). (2018) Male Survivors of Rape and Sexual Assault: Myths & Misconceptions. *RSVP*. Available at: https://rsvporg.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/12.-Male-Survivors-Myths-and-Misconceptions.pdf (Accessed: 18 January 2024).
Rosoff, M. (2020) *The Great Godden*. London: Bloomsbury.
Snyder, B. (2005) *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions.
Storr, W. (2019) *The Science of Storytelling*. London: William Collins.
Trevor Project, The. (2022) It's Still Happening: A Report on Practitioners of So-Called Conversion "Therapy" in the U.S. *The Trevor Project*. Available at: https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FINAL_Its-Still-Happening-Report.pdf (Accessed: 18 January 2024).
Ventriglio, A., Castaldelli-Maia, J.M., Torales, J., De Berardis, D. and Bhugra, D. (2021) Homophobia and mental health: a scourge of modern era. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, 30, e52. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796021000391.

Author Biography

Jo Baker recently completed her MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University, graduating with distinction. Alongside her writing, she works as a psychotherapeutic counsellor specialising in working with the LGBTQIA+ community, young people and domestic abuse.

Drawing on her training in her writing, she creates queer, folklore-inspired children's and YA novels exploring themes of love, belonging and grief. She has been shortlisted and longlisted in various competitions including Searchlight's Best Novel Opening (twice), Voyage YA, Guppy Books and, most recently, PFD's Queer Prize 2023.

She lives in Lewes, East Sussex with her partner and son, and is represented by Silvia Molteni, Head of Children's Books at Peters Fraser and Dunlop.