

The Trouble with Normal:

Trans Youth and the Desire for Normalcy as Reflected in Young Adult Literature

Literature for young adults is a literature of fluidity, conforming to the experiences of young people in specific contexts and shifting with changes in sociopolitical ideologies. For young adults, this literature is an escape as well as a comforting reflection of life, as it covers a broad landscape of topics while providing examples of how characters are able to cope and heal. Kathy Cline, in “Bonding in the Broken Places,” points out that “[t]hrough problems and conflicts, literature allows young adults the catharsis for healing, rebuilding, and changing” (par. 1). This validates young adult novels as having a practical application. These fictional accounts can be seen as a form of therapy that will aid young people in developing healthy self-acceptance: they provide a mirror for society and self; serve as a framework for what trans young adults need from society; reveal the need for trans youth to be *normal*.

Queer sexuality—or trans sexualities in this specific case—is a much under-represented topic within YA literature. The novels that do deal with characters’ non-heteronormative sexualities need to be considered in terms of their evolution within the history of YA young adult literature as well as in terms of their value for young people who are developing gender and sexual identities. At the same time, these narratives ask the audience to reevaluate previously assumed notions of gender and sexuality.

Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, in *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, define YA literature as the “quintessential literature of the outsider who is too often rendered invisible by society . . .” (1). Novels for young adults have a very detailed and specific role to play for teens and for society in the larger sense. There

are three components that I would argue are necessary in order for young adult literature—specifically novels dealing with trans issues—to truly speak to and for young people. The first of these is that the novel needs to be a mirror of society and of self. Cart and Jenkins assert that “there is . . . the need to see one’s face reflected in the pages of a book and thus to find the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone . . .” (1). In order for this component to work, then, the second requisite component of the novel is a reflection of the needs and desires of the young trans person. The third component works with the first two by showing that a young trans person has a legitimate desire to be considered *normal*. Whether this normalcy means completely fitting in with society or simply being able to get out of bed in the morning without fear of rejection is not the point; the point is simply understanding that the desire is a healthy one and is not cause for shame.

The Evolution of Trans Narratives

The body of work dedicated to queer content has been on the rise over the last two decades, though until late in the twentieth century, it was often characterized by poor treatment of characters and issues (Cart 128). Many queer protagonists suffered misfortune of some kind due, in part or whole, to their sexual orientation. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, authors finally began to address the sexual identity of main and secondary characters with an increasing sensitivity, providing role models for young people to aid in their own identity development, but these texts still remain limited in number. Smaller still than this subgenre of queer young adult literature is that of

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trans young adult narratives. The trans young adult novel came into being with the publication of Julie Anne Peters's *Luna* in 2004. But even since then there have been very few novels published for young adults on the topic of trans characters, even when compared with gay or lesbian texts in general. Transgendered characters are easier to find than transsexual characters; however, characters like these are often stereotyped as the bitchy drag queen or the *confused* teenager who can't decide between liking boys or girls. This could be due in part to the general structure of transgender and transsexual narratives as compared to other queer novels. Trans literature tends to be more of the *bildungsroman* narrative pattern than other queer literature, which focuses more often on specific instances at one point in the characters' lives. The large scope of trans texts can be better understood by looking at the history of the transsexual memoir.

The trans young adult novel is strongly connected to the genre of the transsexual autobiography. These accounts were originally a powerful way for transsexuals to search through their histories and understand themselves while also inviting the larger world of readers to participate in the journey. Jay Prosser, in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, states that "[t]he layers of concealment attributed to the disingenuous transsexual are none other than the layers of narrative itself: a layering that does not invalidate transsexual subjectivity but makes it possible" (132). Transsexual narratives, then, work as both a literary genre and a tool in the transitioning process. The young adult transsexual and transgender or trans novel works in much the same way, with a biographical sketch of the protagonist's development to a stage where he or she can more easily understand his or her sexual identity.

Getting Familiar with the Genre

Understanding the Terms

When dealing with sexuality and gender expression, it can be difficult to define or understand all the terms necessary to cover all contexts. For young people,

these labels can be frustrating and infuriating, but they are still necessary in literary criticism in order to capture certain ideas and bring more focus to the works themselves. Riki Wilchins writes, "the term *transgender* . . . arose in the mid 1990s as a way to distinguish people who cross sexes by changing their bodies (transsexual) from people who cross genders by changing their clothing, behavior, and grooming (transgender)" (26). With these definitions in mind, it is easier to understand the difference between the struggles of teens in each of these situations. Between these two categories, however, there are still problems of definition and discrepancies that should be addressed.

Working the Theory

Both Riki Wilchins and Viviane Namaste have written works regarding trans people: their rights, goals, and, of course, obstacles. Wilchins writes, in *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*:

Transsexuals face a unique array of institutional inequities in medicine, legal identity, insurance, child custody laws, and sex-change laws. It may be that transsexuals are such a singular case that it will take a movement based solely on their needs to get the job done. (30)

This is very true, but it is also not the only way to approach trans issues. Namaste argues, in *Sex Change, Social Change*, that "[i]t is not about challenging the binary sex/gender system, it is not about making a critical intervention every waking second of the day, it is not about starting the Gender Revolution." Instead, she posits, "[t]ranssexuality is about the banality of buying some bread, of making photocopies, of getting your shower fixed" (20). It is this quotidian approach to trans characters' lives that is scarce in young adult literature. Poignant and sensitive portrayals of teenage transsexuality are extremely difficult to come by.

Reading the Mirrors

Three major works have surfaced in the early twenty-first century that deal with growing up as a trans person without focusing on the insidious parody or loose theory about confusion surrounding the teenage years. The first of these works is *Luna* (2004), by Julie Ann Peters. The story follows Liam, as seen through the eyes of his sister, who wants to become Luna, as he begins the journey to let people—friends, family, and the general public—see her in public life. The next is

Morgan in the Mirror (2004), by C. C. St. Clair. This follows Morgan as he begins a new life after breast-reduction surgery and falls in love with a woman whom he has just met. The most recent of these novels is *Parrotfish* (2007), by Ellen Wittlinger. This narrative follows Grady, formerly known as Angela, as he navigates the murky waters of high school and tries to blend in while still being able to express his sexuality without fear.

Each of these novels follows a similar path, both necessary and beneficial for those readers unfamiliar with trans issues, though each novel reveals characters at different stages of understanding and development. The authors include interior monologues or exterior dialogues in which the protagonist—and sometimes a secondary character—has the opportunity to explore what it is that makes a person a man or a woman. While this is helpful to the reader—the author can use this as a way to spell out certain constructs of masculinity and femininity—the protagonist also has the opportunity to understand and explore societal influences on his or her thinking about gender and sexuality. The introspective nature of these fictional accounts is tied in with the transsexual autobiographies that preceded them, lending a more credible aspect to the self-examinations of the protagonists.

Prosser describes mirrors within transsexual narratives as revealing the “body image (projected self) and the image of the body (reflected self)” (100). Morgan, in *Morgan in the Mirror*, has a dialogue with a mirror, and ultimately with himself, revealing both his confusion about gender as well as how patriarchal social constructions have influenced his views of men and women. To the mirror he asks, “What is a man, huh?” to which his reflection replies, “whoever has facial hair and walks leading from the shoulders” (31). This isn’t a bad definition per se, though it is definitely lacking in substance and meaningful context. It is the definition of woman that is rather disturbing, as it reveals a certain hyper-masculine viewpoint through which Morgan is viewing his abandoned womanhood. He asks, “What is a woman, then?” and again his reflection replies, “someone who packs boobs we, men, get to play with. Oh yeah!” (31). This chauvinistic understanding of women shows a patriarchal social influence that affects his thinking as he develops as a transsexual.

Grady, in *Parrotfish*, ponders the things that make

a boy and a girl different. Rather than only looking at the biological, however, as Morgan did, Grady looks at both the biological and the performative aspects of femininity and masculinity. Here he looks at the actions associated with gender constructions:

But was [guy stuff] what made me a boy? Charlie was a boy too, and he didn’t give a damn about cars or carpentry projects. I was pretty sure he’d never held a hammer in his hands. So what did it mean that I felt like a boy? If I couldn’t really put it into words myself, was it fair that I was making Laura and Mom and Eve suffer for it? (105)

While later he searches for understanding through the biological, it is just as confusing and discouraging for him as he struggles to come to a conclusion of his own: “What made a person male or female, anyway? The way they looked? The way they acted? The way they thought? Their hormones? Their genitals? What if some of those attributes pointed in one direction and some in the other?” (131).

For the characters in Peters’s novel, it is less about discovering what makes a man or a woman than about what a conflict it is, both personally and socially, to feel stuck in the wrong body. Regan, Liam’s sister, tries to explain this concept to a friend:

I know this is hard to understand. It’s even harder to explain, but Liam feels like a girl. He is a girl, really. Problem is, she’s a girl who was born with a boy’s body. I don’t know how it happens, or why. Luna says it’s hard-wired into her brain to be female. It’s who she knows she is, same way you and I know. It’s instinctive. Natural. (191)

Liam’s struggle is less about the social constructions of gender and more about the gender repression evident in society that leaves little room for variation or challenge.

Through these three mirrors, it is possible to see the coherent and unanimous expression of the challenges faced by these protagonists as they attempt to be themselves and still associate with friends and family and survive in society. The main point to keep in focus here is that none of these authors is attempt-

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ing to make a revolutionary out of the protagonist, but instead they choose to show the internal struggle for understanding and the external struggle to simply fit in to society. Peters makes this struggle clear through Liam as he laments, “Every day, the same old thing. Hiding, lying, holding [Luna] in. It’s too hard. I can’t do it” (20). The struggle, at times, is just too much for these young adults who want to stop hiding their self-identified genders.

The Trouble (or Not) with Normal

At this point, it is helpful to go back to Viviane Namaste and her statement that “[t]ranssexuality is about the banality of buying some bread, of making photocopies, of getting your shower fixed,” (20) in order to tie together theory with fictional accounts. Each of these three protagonists desires to pass, to go unnoticed in everyday situations. For Morgan, it’s about dating; for Grady, it’s about using the bathroom; for Liam/Luna, it’s about going to the mall. The sentiment is painful and at times difficult to read. Each young person is struggling to simply live as they feel they should be able to, without having to make a huge statement or revolutionize societal understandings of sexuality and gender.

Morgan is attempting a relationship with a woman whom he has met since his chest reconstruction surgery. Everything is going fine until she begins to wonder why he won’t take his underwear off. She gets annoyed, and he finally has the opportunity to spill his pent-up emotions about the situation:

“I pass, Christen. I pass! That’s my fucking reward. No, not a reward! It’s my right, my . . . my compensation for having been born wrapped up inside the wrong envelope! Hey! Look at me. I’ve always been a man in here and in there!” He raps his knuckles against his head and hits his fist against heart before grabbing at his crotch. “The only place I haven’t been a male . . . ever, not for real . . . is here!” His tone is bitter. “Only fucken *there!*” (83)

His frustration is evident, as well as his overwhelming desire to be seen as *normal* and to have a relationship without the interrogations and without being told that he is *only* a passer, a fake, and a con (85).

For Liam, the desire is to simply be able to go to the mall and be Luna without people giving her a disgusted look. The intensity of his desire shows up in a few statements made during his first time out at the mall as Luna. He asks his sister, “Okay, how do

I look?” to which she replies, “Really good . . . You look . . . ordinary” (88). It is the ordinariness that is important here. He wants to be seen as everyone else is seen, without anything to differentiate him from the average young woman looking for clothes. This excitement is even more evident as he declares, “Nobody’s reading me . . . This is such a rush” (90). Unfortunately, shortly after this statement, a bunch of teenage boys notice something is not quite as they think it should be and attempt to attack Luna as she is browsing through CDs. This highlights the difficulties—both internal discomfort and external forms of violence and hatred—for the trans youth living in a society intolerant of almost anything that is not *normal*.

Wittlinger brings up the most banal and yet one of the most difficult places in society for a transsexual to go—the bathroom:

The whole bathroom issue was a much bigger problem than I’d imagined it would be. Before this I probably never used a school bathroom more than once a day, if that, but now, suddenly, I felt like I had to pee all the time. So even though Ms. Unger’s office was way the hell on one end of the school and most of my classes were on the other end, it was comforting to know that at least there was someplace I could urinate—or hide out—without fear, even if it meant being late to my next class. (75)

In Grady’s case, he is only able to use a bathroom that his gym teacher lets him use. It is impossible for him to use any other bathroom in the school because he won’t correspond to the sign on the door.

What good are these novels, then? What do they say to their audiences? They tell their audiences that transsexuality and transgenderism are not simply adult issues. Each of these authors wrote a young adult novel, which in itself illustrates the necessity for positive and sensitive examples in literature for young people. As a literature of change, young adult literature is a necessity for teens to glean information in an interesting and less intrusive or insensitive way than through negative institutional discourse or research books. Each novel is something that a particular young person will be able to identify with and possibly find answers in. The trouble at the moment is that there are so few novels reaching out to the trans young adult audience.

Judith Halberstam wrote an article entitled, “Oh Bondage Up Yours! Female Masculinity and the Tomboy.” While I am not focusing on tomboyism, the idea of female masculinity does fit into this narrative

frame, as two of the novels are dealing with FTM (female to male) transsexuals. Halberstam addresses the issues of transsexuality and their treatment in the majority of novels:

. . . it is troubling in the way [novels] resolve the problem of intersexuality or transsexuality by abjecting gender ambiguity. It is in-betweenness (not androgyny but the active construction of new genders) here and elsewhere in the history of tomboys that inspires rage and terror in parents, coworkers, lovers, and bosses. (210)

This statement speaks to Luna's aforementioned situation at the mall when confronted by the gang of teens who see something that does not quite fit their socially constructed view of gender: they sense something in-between about Luna and feel threatened. While this does slightly overflow into the field of gender expression, it is difficult to differentiate the two, especially when dealing with societal reactions within these texts.

While this negative reaction to trans characters in the novels may seem unfair, the authors are both portraying and speaking to a society that exists. So while the "abjecting" of gender ambiguity is not a good thing, it can be transformed into a tool in these novels, used to demonstrate to non-trans readers the turmoil that trans youth go through in daily life. Halberstam later states that there is still a necessity for novels that "offer an alternative model of the tomboy, one that rejects androgyny and binary gender systems, revels in girl masculinity, and encourages queer adult-hoods . . ." (211).

In Conclusion

The young adult novel that deals with transsexual and transgender youth has a number of purposes for coming into existence. The first of these is to mirror society and self. Without mirrors to reflect self and others, problems can remain unseen for long periods of time. These novels reflect the negative implications of societal expectations of gender representation and also show the perceived reflections of trans youth through a mirrored image of themselves. The second purpose of these novels is to show what the transsexual and transgender youth needs from society. Trans young people need support and nonjudgmental acceptance, regardless of gender expression, especially in settings such as school or religious institutions. The third, and

probably most important, aspect of these novels is to show trans youths' need—desire—to engage in the quotidian activities of life, whether going to the mall, dating, or simply using the washroom at school. All of these aspects work together in the young adult novel to help create a template that society and those not educated in trans issues can use to aid in the development and overall care of the transsexual and transgender teen throughout adolescence and the high school experience.

Robert Bittner is an undergraduate student at Simon Fraser University. In 2008, he completed an honors essay tracking the influences of religious institutions on protagonists in queer young adult literature during the last decade. He is currently studying queer and trans young adult literature and plans to attend graduate school next year. He will present at the SWTX PCA/ACA Conference in 2010.

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