

# “The Case of the Missing Bisexuals”: Bisexuality in Books for Young

## Readers

Dr. B.J. Epstein<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

As it becomes more accepted and indeed even desirable to discuss different types of sexuality and different kinds of family set-ups with children, it is vital to analyse how children’s books and young adult novels portray these topics. In particular, it is worth looking at how bisexuality is depicted in literature for younger readers<sup>2</sup>. These texts may be read to or by children in primary and secondary schools, and they may even be read by students in tertiary education. In this paper, then, I will briefly discuss the history of children’s literature with regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other queer characters (LGBT)<sup>3</sup>, and I will then proceed to explore bisexuality in more depth. What this analysis suggests is that bisexuality is not much recognised or accepted, and if literature is relied on in educational settings as a way of teaching young people about a given topic, then children are not learning about bisexuality. If bisexuality is mentioned, it tends to be portrayed as less of an option than other types of sexuality. In short, bisexuality is either invisible or else negatively portrayed in books for younger readers.

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<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to Dr. B.J. Epstein, School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich, England, NR4 7TJ, or [B.Epstein@uea.ac.uk](mailto:B.Epstein@uea.ac.uk).

<sup>2</sup> This is not the place to discuss the definition of children’s literature (see Epstein, 2013:8-15 for more on that), but it is worth pointing out that I consider children’s books in a broad sense to be anything read by people 18 and younger. That is why I explore both picture books and young adult works here.

<sup>3</sup> By “otherwise queer”, I refer to those who choose the queer label to represent their sexuality. This includes, among others, people involved in BDSM, intersex people, those who are questioning their sexuality, asexuals, and pansexuals, but only if they choose the queer label themselves. I have not yet found, say, a young adult novel with an asexual protagonist, or a book for children where the parents are in a master-slave relationship. This is not the place to discuss whether such topics are appropriate or not for children, but I simply wish to point out that these people exist in reality but not yet in the realm of children’s books, and my personal view is that children have a right to be exposed to the world around them, in all its permutations. However, I am aware that not everyone is comfortable with the term “queer”, especially in relation to children. In this paper, then, I will use LGBT for short, and I will leave aside “queer” elements for the present discussion. This does not mean that I am ignoring, for example, intersexual or asexual people.

Keywords:

children's literature, young adult literature, LGBT children's literature, queer literature and theory, bisexuality, prejudice, stereotyping, education

## Introduction

How are non-heterosexualities portrayed in children's literature? Which non-heterosexualities are featured and why? What information, stereotypes, and beliefs do these books expose children to? And why does that matter? In previous papers and in my new book (Epstein, 2013), I have analysed these topics in more detail, and this has suggested that while homosexuality has become more accepted in children's literature- to a certain extent- bisexuality is unfortunately still missing or, if it does feature, it is portrayed in such a way as to imply that it is less acceptable than being heterosexual or homosexual (see, for example, Epstein, forthcoming, 2013). In this paper, I shall explore these situations in more detail by analysing a number of English-language books for children, both picture books and books for older readers, in order to understand how they understand and portray bisexuality and why. Since these books may be used to educate children and young adults and, since I believe all types of people deserve to see themselves represented in literature, such an analysis is vital.

I believe that there are two major types of reading that people do: we might read books to see ourselves reflected (i.e. mirror books) and we might also read books to see other selves (i.e. window books). Children's literature in particular has a special role to play in our ever more globalised world by giving children the opportunity to read and learn about various kinds of people, backgrounds, and perspectives, and of course it also offers them the chance to read about other people like themselves. Thus, the texts can serve as both mirrors and windows. Literature helps shape children's experiences, intellects, imaginations, feelings, and thoughts, so which books they have access to and how those books are presented, is an essential area of study. In an article on international literature and why children should read it, there is this quote: "To know the classic stories of a country creates a climate, an attitude for understanding the people for whom the literature is a heritage. When children know they

are reading in translation the same stories that children in another country are reading, a sense of nearness grows and expands” (Wheeler, quoted in Clark et al., 2004:12). The same can be said for literature that is diverse in other ways, such as in terms of gender and sexuality. When we are exposed to people through literature, they are no longer “other.” The window has thus been opened.

However, children’s literature is only now starting to be analysed in more depth, partly because previously, children’s literature was seemingly considered to be less serious, important, or interesting than literature for adults. While some of the newest research in the field of children’s literature looks at the issue of diversity in children’s books (see, for example, Gopalakrishnan, 2011, or chapter 6 in Travers and Travers, 2008), often this is in terms of race and religion and sometimes ability, but not sexuality. If sexuality is not studied, then diverse forms of sexuality are certainly rarely discussed. And, to be even more specific, the few bisexual characters who appear in literature for younger readers are often described in negative terms in the works themselves and not analysed much in theoretical texts. In other words, based on my analysis of a number of children’s books, bisexuality is apparently still beyond acceptable and “normal.” As teachers/parents/other adults may rely on children’s books as a way of teaching young people about particular subjects, it is therefore deeply problematic that we have a case of missing or stereotyped bisexuals in children’s literature.

Over the past 30 years, there has been something of an explosion of books written in English for children and young people that portray LGBT characters, and authors of such works include Nancy Garden, Jacqueline Woodson, Julie Anne Peters, David LaRochelle, David Levithan, Ellen Wittlinger, Aidan Chambers, and Alex Sanchez. As one critic mentioned: “Premarital sex, drug abuse, homosexuality, running away from home are hardly remarkable any more”(Townsend,1990:276) While this is phrased infelicitously, in part because it implies that homosexuality is on a par with drug abuse, the point is that

homosexuality is no longer considered inappropriate to include in literature for young people. I have explored elsewhere some of the problems with these books (see Epstein 2012 and Epstein 2013), but here instead I will focus on the fact that Townsend's quote specifically references homosexuality, thereby ignoring bisexuality (and transsexuality and other non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender identities), and that many LGBT children's books do the same. How, then, can children be exposed to the existence of bisexuality? First, I will give some important background information on LGBT children's books and LGBT parenting, as well as on the idea of fiction being employed as educational material. Then I will look at specific examples of texts that feature bisexuality, or that do not.

### **Background on LGBT Children's Books**

One of the first books for children to feature LGBT characters was *Mette bor hos Morten og Erik* by Danish writer Susanne Bösche (1981 in Danish, 1983 in English, as *Jenny lives with Eric and Martin*; the translation of Mette into Jenny is an issue worth exploring elsewhere). Bösche has written:

I wrote *Jenny lives with Eric and Martin* back in 1981 because I became aware of the problems which some children face when meeting family groupings different from the ones they are familiar with, i.e. mum and dad, possibly mum and dad divorced, maybe a step-parent. It's not possible to go through life without meeting people living in different ways, and they shouldn't come as a shock to anybody ( 2000: n.p.)

In other words, she chose to write this book to give children a window into other family set-ups and to educate them about what might be considered normal. Later within that decade, the first picture books written in English were *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesléa

Newman (1989) and *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (1991). These books, too, appear to be aimed at making LGBT parents seem acceptable and like heterosexual parents. They emphasise that these families are as good and normal and loving as heterosexual ones. The LGBT characters in them are always parents, not the young people themselves.

Nancy Garden's *Annie On My Mind* (1982) and Aidan Chambers' *Dance on My Grave* (1982) were among the first books a) for older readers and b) to feature LGBT characters who were not parents. Still, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, most of the books with LGBT characters were picture books, aimed at young children. Perhaps this was the case because more gay and lesbian couples were having or adopting children and they wanted books to read aloud to their children that featured families like theirs, suggesting that these books were meant to mirror those families. Whatever the reason, there are quite a few picture books with same-sex parents (although not as many as one would expect given the number of LGBT parents raising children).

In more recent years, LGBT characters have also increasingly been included in books for older children and young adults. The characters are now not just parents but young people themselves, although a surprising number of the books for young adults still feature LGBT parents, such as *The Last Exit to Normal* by Michael Harmon (2008) and *Say the Word* by Jeannine Garsee (2009), and some have a combination of LGBT adults and LGBT young people, such as *Naomi and Ely's No Kiss List* by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan (2007). What this suggests is that authors, publishers, readers, and parents may be – Judy Blume and her ilk notwithstanding – uncomfortable with young people's sexuality, especially if that sexuality is not heterosexual. It also might be because the young children of gay and lesbian parents mentioned above were growing up and wanted to see their families reflected in books for young adults and not just in picture books.

In the last 15 years, the number of titles that have been published has dramatically increased. To use one major public library system as an example, of the 30 books the Chicago Public Library listed under the category of “juvenile homosexuality fiction,” nearly all were from the 21st century. The oldest was from 1989, but the rest were late '90s and the '00s, although let it be noted that this is just one library system, albeit a large one, and that it does not contain all published books.

One can add here that there has not yet been much research into such books. For example, in their overview of children’s literature, Travers and Travers cover the topic of sexuality in only one page (2008:287). Gender is mentioned (such as Lerer’s analysis of books for boys versus books for girls, 2008), but I have not found an in-depth analysis of sexuality, especially non-heterosexuality, in children’s books, although Judy Blume’s works are frequently cited as some of the first such books to show topics such as sex and menstruation (she began publishing in 1969). If sexuality in literature is not studied much, then diverse forms of sexuality are certainly rarely discussed (one of the few examples is Weisbard, 2001, which is a review of a book by Frances Ann Day, 2000, though I have been unable to get a copy of Day’s work), although this is starting to change, with new works such as *Over the Rainbow*, edited by Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd (2011), or articles such as by Shimanoff, Elia, and Yep (2012). In the latter work, Shimanoff, Elia, and Yep note that there are “limited representations” of LGBT characters in children’s books, because of heteronormative and commercial reasons (2012:1006).

### **Background on LGBT Parenting**

As many of the LGBT characters in picture books are parents rather than the young people themselves, it is worth briefly mentioning the issue of LGBT parenting. There has not yet been a huge amount of research into LGBT parenting. What research there is generally

focuses on lesbian and gay parenting (i.e. not bisexual or transgender parenting); books such as by Hicks, 2011; Goldberg, 2010; Johnson and O'Connor, 2002; and Spilsbury, 2011 that refer to same-sex/LGBT parenting do not mention bisexual or transgender parents whatsoever. Hicks suggests that this lack of research on LGBT parenting generally may be because those who work on LGBT issues feel that parenting is not as “queer” or does not allow for as much “queering” as other aspects of LGBT life (2011:17). Also, much of the research that does exist frequently looks at the question of whether children raised by such parents turn out “normal” and whether their family lives can be compared to “normal”, heterosexual families (cf. Johnson and O'Connor, 2002: 3 and 36-53, and for literature, see for example Epstein, 2011), which seems to presuppose that something will go wrong with the children of lesbian or gay parents. Often, such work seems to attempt to reassure readers that children can be raised into healthy, happy adults by LGBT parents. As Johnson and O'Connor (2002) suggest, it would be better to focus on parenting techniques, say, or values, rather than on using heteronormative approaches to the topic of parenting.

Other research on the subject sometimes takes an opposing viewpoint in order to prove that children should not be raised by LGBT parents. A typical example is Morgan's (2002) book, *Children as Trophies?*. The title, together with the publisher (the Christian Institute), suggest Morgan's ultimate conclusion. A sample line from her book is:

Procreation is tied to marriage. Children are not to be spawned in random relations but begotten in arrangements in which their parents are bound to their offspring by the ties of law as well as nature. The intention is for parents to be as committed to the nurture of their children as they are committed to each other as husband and wife (2002:11).

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This sort of comment, which is very typical of the argument against same-sex parenting, refers to “nature” and to someone or something’s “intention”; one can perhaps assume that given the publisher, the reference is to a god, who has created nature in a particular way with specific goals or intentions in mind. The comment also uses dramatic language to suggest that LGBT people only have “random relations”, rather than committed ones, and that they would want to “spawn” children in order to use them as “trophies”. Morgan’s argument is somewhat tautological, in that she seems to think it is wrong for children to be raised by parents who are not “tied” together by law, but of course if committed LGBT couples are not allowed to legally get married, as is the case in many parts of the world, then they cannot be “bound” to each other and their “offspring by the ties of law”.

Regardless of this sort of argument, which of course is not the focus here, and regardless of the lack of research into LGBT parenting, the fact is that same-sex couples are indeed having children. As Hull puts it, “gay and lesbian couples increasingly seek to form viable family units of their own, either by acting as co-parents to children from previous marriages or by becoming parents together” (2006:5). Also, laws in the US and in some other countries are seemingly designed to help them achieve this through fostering, adoption, insemination, and other relevant procedures (though it is worth mentioning that laws are starting to change in the US in regard to same-sex marriage). Some of the partners in these same-sex couples must certainly be bisexual, but this is scarcely mentioned in research on parenting from, say, a sociological standpoint. Likewise, as some of the examples below will show, there are some same-sex couples in literature where one or both of the partners could conceivably be bisexual, but this is ignored.

The situation is perhaps even more dire in regard to literature and also into how literature is used in the classroom. As far as I am aware, there has been little research into how same-sex parenting is portrayed in children’s literature. One interesting example is from

Jane Sunderland's (2010) book *Literature, Gender and Children's Fiction*, in a chapter co-written with Mark McGlashan on two-mum and two-dad families. One of the analyses they carry out there is to look at the visual representations in picture books in order to see how much physical contact is portrayed. In regard to the classroom, the aforementioned article by Shimanoff, Elia, and Yep also has intriguing suggestions for how to use LGBT literature with children (2012:1019-1026). But beyond these works, this is still uncharted territory. More specifically, I have not found any research that discusses how bisexual parents are represented in children's books.

### **Fiction and Its Role**

Finally, before moving on to explore bisexuality in literature, it is worth looking briefly at the role that fiction plays in the education of young people. The larger issues of whether literature ought to be or can be realistic and whether it ought to be or can be educational will not be taken up here, as they are beyond the scope of this article. However, what is important to discuss is whether texts for children in particular ought to be educational and/or realistic in regard to their sexual content. Many scholars view information as essential for adolescents to have in order to develop healthy romantic and sexual relationships (see, for example, Moore and Rosenthal, 2006), which is perhaps what one would expect. However, a somewhat surprising finding here is that some scholars feel that fiction can be a way, or even the main way, for children to learn about sex and sexuality. This seems to be especially the case for young adults, but it is also true for younger children, which is to say that authors and educators are very aware of the potential topics and uses of age-appropriate literature. For example, there could be bisexual characters in picture books, but they would be more likely to engage in sexual activity only in young adult (YA) novels.

As some researchers point out, “[a]ll theories of adolescent development give sexuality a central place in negotiating the transition from child to adult” (Moore and Rosenthal, 2006:2). Given how important sexuality is, then young people must be informed about it in some way. But rather than solely relying on pamphlets, say, or sexuality education courses, literature is sometimes used for the same purposes, in part because “many teachers are not trained to present sensitive and controversial topics, and indeed may feel uncomfortable or anxious about doing so” (Moore and Rosenthal, 2006:117). Hence, adults may turn to literature because they do not need to be so actively involved; a young person can read a novel and thereby “learn” about sex from it. Also, literature is seen as less cold than factual details. As Reynolds writes, “many adults believe that the best way to protect children from premature, unwanted, or risk sex is by providing accurate but not clinical information in forms and formats young people enjoy and trust” (2007:117). She adds that “[f]iction offers a unique way to learn about and prepare for experiences to come, including sexual and romantic relationships” (2007:120); and also that children’s literature in particular encourages “readers to approach ideas, issues, and objects from new perspectives and so prepare the way for change” (2007:1). Does all this then mean that literature has some sort of duty to give facts and information and to reflect reality? Based on the research, it does seem to imply that.

Pinsent points out that a few decades ago, writers often felt they could discuss “issues” in YA literature but were hesitant about which issues and how. Some writers “seem to have felt that portraying their characters within a ‘real’ world was more appropriate to the consideration of immediate social problems such as drugs” (2005:202). But even once they started writing about sex, they mostly portrayed it in a negative light. Reynolds says that “although teenage sexual activity has become a commonplace of YA fiction, until recently the tendency has been to focus on the problems it can bring” (2007:115), so that “[w]here once ‘doing’ it in YA fiction meant boys and girls losing control and reaping the

consequences – usually in the form of pregnancy – books for teenagers increasingly acknowledge that the sexual orientations of the young are just as varied and their desires at least as urgent as those of the adults around them” (2007:122). Some of this is due to the time when authors were writing and some of it is due to other authors breaking the boundaries. Today, YA novels that feature sex “now emphasise the need for sex to be safe rather than the need to avoid sex” (Reynolds, 2007:122). Interestingly, few discuss this in regard to LGBT sex, except in reference to gay males and AIDS, and thus even fewer broach the subject of safe sex for bisexuals, as though they assume it is not an issue.

In sum, then, it seems that adults use fiction as a way of, as Kokkola phrases it, “socialising teenagers into conducting themselves in a manner approved by adults” (2011:n.p.) Fiction has changed over time, perhaps reflecting changing views of sex in general and young people’s knowledge of sex, sexuality, and gender in particular. It also may reflect what is considered acceptable to include in children’s and YA literature. So where, then, does bisexuality fit into this?

### **Missing Pieces**

As Gilbert (2006) points out, we must attend to absence, and yet so often we focus on what is present; to analyse what is missing and why could therefore offer much information. In this article, then, I am attempting to explore what is missing from LGBT children’s books. And one of the major absences is bisexuality. Where are the bisexual, transgender, or otherwise queer characters in children’s books? Note this quote from a review: “The subject of lesbians and gays in children’s literature is one that will not “go away” no matter how many debates, controversies, or protests accompany the subject” (Pizurie, 1994:n.p.) This comment only refers to “lesbians and gays” and not to “lesbians and gays and bisexuals and transgenders and others on the LGBT spectrum and beyond”, and the books analysed here tend to ignore

the other colours in the rainbow, which may mean that authors, publishers, and members of society in general are able to accept LGBT people as long as they are monosexuals and as long as they are not too queer.<sup>4</sup>

### **Bisexuality in LGBT Children's Books**

Bisexuality is most often understood as meaning that someone is attracted to both men and women.<sup>5</sup> It is a complicated term and a complicated identity, one that troubles many (to use Butler's term, 1990). As Dollimore points out, "bisexuals have been variously characterized as promiscuous, immature, undecided, treacherous, cowardly, and carriers of AIDS into the straight community."<sup>6</sup> Conversely, and even more recently, they are being hailed not only as one of the most politically radical of all sexual minorities, but provocatively postmodern as well." (1997:250). Which is it then? Are bisexuals immature? Or are they radical and postmodern? Or are they something else altogether?

A major issue here is that bisexuals are generally not visibly identifiable. As Ochs discusses, they are not visually recognisable the way some ethnic groups are (1996:219), and if they are visually recognisable at some point, it is usually due to, for example, holding hands with or kissing someone of the same-sex, which would mean that they are seen as lesbian or gay, not bisexual (Ochs, 1996). If they are holding hands with or kissing someone of the "opposite" sex<sup>7</sup>, then they are identified as heterosexual (ibid.). Hence, unless bisexuals regularly proclaim their bisexual identity and/or wear bisexual flag jewellery or t-shirts, they are not a visible minority.

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<sup>4</sup> As I discuss in Epstein, 2013, authors tend to also ignore most aspects of intersectionality, such as race, religion, ability, class, size, and so on.

<sup>5</sup> Today, with a greater number of sexes/genders being recognised, due to the strength of the transgender movement, many would take issue with the idea that there are just men and women in the world. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will continue to use the older definition.

<sup>6</sup> One could add here that bisexual women are sometimes accused of bringing AIDS and other STIs into the lesbian community, just as bisexual men are thought to bring STIs into the "straight" community.

<sup>7</sup> The term "opposite sex" implies that there are two sexes. This is not the place for such a discussion, but I prefer to see sex and gender as being on continuums.

To become visible is to challenge norms and perhaps to face a lot of negative stereotyping and discrimination. Hutchins writes that

[s]tereotypes and misinformation about bisexuality and bisexual behavior—that bisexuals are “really gay,” that bisexuality “doesn’t exist,” and that bisexuals are “confused, can’t make commitments or have mature relationships”—all take their toll... Many bisexual people concede to social pressure and “choose”—often depending on whom they’re partnered with or the community or group of people they identify with most easily. (1996:241)

Also, sex columnist Dan Savage points out that it is unfortunately easy for bisexuals in opposite-sex relationships to pass as heterosexual (2011:n.p.). He writes, “Most adult bisexuals, for whatever reason, wind up in opposite-sex relationships. And most comfortably disappear into presumed heterosexuality” (ibid.). Thus, there may be more bisexuals in this corpus of books than I recognise. They could, for example, have previously been in same-sex relationships but are currently single or in opposite-sex relationships and just never happen to come out or to be outed in these novels. But such situations simply contribute further to bisexual invisibility. While it may feel forced for someone in an opposite-sex or same-sex relationship to mention that she/he is bisexual, it could nonetheless be extremely beneficial.<sup>8</sup>

In picture books, there are some characters who could conceivably be read as bisexual, but only by a knowing reader. For example, in Michael Willhoite’s *Daddy’s Roommate* (1991), it seems as though the main character’s “Daddy” was previously in a relationship with his mother, and now is with the euphemistically referred to “roommate”.

Whether Daddy identifies as bisexual or whether he came to the realisation of a homosexual

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<sup>8</sup> For example, actor Anna Paquin, who has said that despite being married to a man and pregnant with his child, she still identifies as bisexual and will not deny her sexuality or her attraction to women, has been praised for her commitment to the bisexual movement.

orientation later in life is not said. This might not have seemed like a relevant topic to the author, but one could argue that such a backstory could be woven into the plot. Some authors may prefer for the characters to “just be” and for their sexuality to be so normalised that no discussion is needed, but this of course contributes to what Savage calls the “bisexual closet” (2011:n.p.). This relates back to the earlier discussion of how bisexuals are ignored in most discussions of same-sex parenting. People seem to assume that bisexuals are either heterosexual, if in opposite-sex relationships, or homosexual, if in same-sex relationships, rather than being genuinely bisexual all the time, and thus some authors/publishers appear to see no need to refer to the fact that bisexuals can and do parent, and that they do so from within a variety of relationships or familial set-ups. Other picture books in which there are same-sex couples that could contain one or more bisexual person are Hedi Argent’s *Josh and Jaz Have Three Mums* (2004), Lesléa Newman’s *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989), Lesléa Newman’s *Donovan’s Big Day* (2012), or indeed most works by Lesléa Newman. In all of these books, there is a same-sex couple (nearly always two women) and at least one child, but there is no explanation of where the child or children came from. It is certainly possible that one of these women was previously in a relationship with a man and a child resulted from that relationship, and now the child is being raised by the same-sex couple. Or even if the couple adopted or inseminated together, one of the women may nonetheless be bisexual. The fact that these possibilities are ignored in picture books seems to strengthen the idea of a dichotomy, in which characters are either heterosexual or homosexual, and bisexuality is not an accepted option. Bisexual characters are simply missing in picture books. Their absence suggests to young people that adults may have relationships with one gender or the other, but not both.

The situation is slightly different in YA novels, because there are a few bisexual characters, which means there is some visibility. Unfortunately, however, in LGBT literature

for young people, when there are bisexual characters, they are not always described positively, nor are they shown living happy bisexual lives. I found one bisexual main character, in *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan (2003). Kyle is portrayed as unhappy because of having a divided sexuality. Here, he is talking to his ex-boyfriend:

“I’m so confused.”

“Why?”

“I still like girls.”

“So?”

“And I also like guys.”

I touch his knee. “It doesn’t sound like you’re confused, then.”

“But I wanted to be one or the other. With you, I wanted just to like you. Then, after you, I wanted to just like the girls. But every time I’m with one, I think the other’s possible.”

“So you’re bisexual.”

Kyle’s face flushes. “I hate that word,” he tells me, slumping back in his chair. “It makes it sound like I’m divided.” (2003:85)

This quote suggests that Kyle is “divided,” which he clearly views as a negative word and a negative situation. Also, the way he describes himself as liking both guys and girls reflects the stereotype of bisexuals as being “indecisive and promiscuous” (Ochs, 1996:218). Although Kyle’s ex-boyfriend does not chastise or criticise Kyle for being bisexual, Kyle seems to have internalised societal biphobia; he does not want to be seen as someone who wants anyone and everyone. As Ochs explains, “[m]any people privately identify as bisexual but, to avoid conflict and preserve their ties to a treasured community, choose to label



themselves publicly as lesbian, gay, or straight, further contributing to bisexual invisibility” (1996:233). Kyle is struggling with whether to identify – publicly or privately – as bisexual; his isolation and unhappiness are evident from his usage of the word “divided” and his unwillingness to accept the label that best seems to describe his sexuality.

In Maureen Johnson’s *The Bermudez Triangle*, one character is described as “Felicia Clark, the outspoken ‘If you have a pulse, I’m interested’ bisexual sex addict” (2004:121), and this perhaps explains why the character of Avery, who is in a relationship with Mel but also is attracted to men, is unwilling to describe herself as bisexual. Avery recognises that she is attracted to both men and women, but she seems disturbed by this idea. She tentatively tells her friend, Nina, who asks, “You like guys too?” (2004:186). Avery’s response is to blush and to think, “Something about that question made her feel like...a glutton. Like she wanted *everyone*. Guys, girls, dogs, cats, populations of whole cities.” (ibid., italics original) In short, then, Johnson’s novel quite clearly shows the negative ideas surrounding bisexuality in YA literature.

In another book, *The Year They Burned the Books* by Nancy Garden (1999), Jamie and Terry call themselves “maybes”, because they are not yet certain about their sexuality. They talk about shades of meaning and they call people “probably maybes” or “maybe probablys”, but they do not see bisexuality as a possibility. They must go one way or another. So bisexuality is shown as a state of confusion, one that a person will “come out” of, so to speak, by going one way or the other, i.e. gay or straight. A more charitable reading of this is that they are aware that, as Hutchins puts it, “[m]any bisexuals identify first as heterosexual and then as lesbian/gay, back and forth several times, before settling on a bisexual identity” (1996:241). Perhaps Jamie and Terry are talking about people who will identify back and forth for a while before “settling on a bisexual identity”; this sort of deeper understanding seems unlikely, however. What I would guess is more likely is that Jamie and Terry feel

unable to choose a bisexual identity and they do not see the possibility of being “sexually postmodern” (Dollimore, 1997:253) or of helping to “trouble”, to use Butler’s (1990) term, or de-stabilise binary systems.

Ava, the main character in Lili Wilkinson’s *Pink* (2007), has come out as a lesbian, has been accepted by her friends and family as a lesbian, and has a girlfriend. When she switches schools, she does not tell her new classmates that she is gay; in fact, she finds that she likes a young man and wants to try kissing him and possibly having a relationship with him. Ava spends the entire novel agonising over what this means for her sexuality. Instead of simply recognising herself as bisexual, she pretends to be heterosexual at her new school and slips back into a homosexual role when with her girlfriend, family, and old friends. It is only at the very end of the book that she seems to consider bisexuality. She tells a friend:

“I don’t know whether that means I’m straight or gay, or gay with a twist of straight or what. And I have to figure that out.”

Sam looked at me like I was crazy. “I hear it’s okay to be both,” he said, with a little shake of his head. “All the kids are doing it.”

“I know. But I just always thought I’d *know*. For sure.” (2007:285, italics original)

Here, then, Ava expects to be straight or gay and to know for sure; she is told by a friend that she could be “both”, by which he seems to mean bisexual, but she does not seem willing to accept that label or identity. In other words, this is yet another young adult novel in which bisexuality is not portrayed as an acceptable identity.

Besides bisexuality being described negatively by those who might be bi, other LGBT characters seem to look down on it. It may seem surprising that some of the young LGBT

characters are biphobic; one would hope that minorities would not be phobic of or oppressive towards other minorities, but these books clearly show that it does nonetheless happen. When transgender J switches to an LGBT high school in Cris Beam's *I Am J* (2011), in his English class, the students read work by Walt Whitman, and some of the young people say it's "nasty" to be bi (2011:179). J "didn't expect this from queer kids" (ibid.), but these books suggest that people – queer or not – do have negative feelings towards bisexuals. It also shows little recognition of sexual fluidity (cf. Diamond, 2008).

Again quoting Hutchins, "claiming a bisexual identity takes great courage, especially in the absence of role models and validation...The open assertion of a bisexual identity affects everyone, not just the person identifying as bisexual, because it disturbs the set of assumptions that sexual orientations and attractions are binary, exclusive, either-or categories" (1996:241). Maybe the lack of support for LGBT people in general and bisexuals specifically affects young people so that it is too hard for them to come out as bisexual until they are older; however, the fact that more people are coming out at younger ages today seems to speak against this. Regardless, we are still left with the question of why there are no openly bisexual adult characters in these books. Being openly bisexual can "transgress the either-or paradigm" and thereby "open up conversations about sexual diversity and promote sexuality education in a way that doesn't pressure people to take sides or close off dialogue" (Hutchins, 1996:243). But this does not seem to happen in LGBT books for young readers.

Ochs writes that a "primary manifestation of biphobia is the denial of the very existence of bisexual people" (1996:224). In this case, most of the books in this corpus of texts seem to manifest biphobia. Savage writes, "Yes, lots of people judge and condemn and fear bisexuals. If those were good reasons to stay closeted, no gay or lesbian person would ever come out. And if bisexuals did come out in greater numbers, they could rule... well, not

the world, but they could rule the parallel LGBT universe.” (2011:n.p.) What we need is for more bisexuals in literature to come out and to be recognised for who they are.

### **Conclusion**

I have attempted to cover a lot of ground in this paper in order to explore the case of the missing bisexuals. I started by first giving background information about LGBT books for children and young adults, LGBT parenting, and the role of sexuality in fiction for young readers. If it is true that teachers and parents rely on literature as a way of teaching about topics such as sexuality, then we must analyse the literature to see what lessons are being offered. What the research findings discussed here suggest is that while lesbian and gay male characters appear in LGBT books for children, bisexual characters are mostly missing, perhaps because they are deemed too challenging or inappropriate. If they do feature, they are often shown to be unhappy or to feel divided or to believe that they have to be gay or straight and cannot have a bisexual identity. This propagates a binary system in regard to sexuality, and does not allow children to learn about other ways of living. If literature is relied on as a method of teaching young people about different types of sexuality, among many other topics, then that literature ought to be as detailed and inclusive as possible. Unfortunately, this is currently not the situation, so what we are left with is the case of the missing bisexuals.

I would argue that what needs to happen is that more bisexuals should feature in literature for younger readers; this may mean that bisexuals themselves should write such literature, as it appears that others are not doing so. Shimanoff, Elia, and Yep (2012) argue that for commercial and other reasons, there is not enough LGBT literature; publishers must therefore be helped to recognise that it would be a successful proposition to include bisexuality in children’s books. Perhaps if more bisexual adults – especially parents, teachers, and others in authority positions – were out as bisexual, this would encourage young people

to feel confident in coming out as well as stimulate authors to feature bisexuality in their works. And in turn publishers would realise that bisexuality is not a niche or minor topic but rather one that affects and is relevant to all readers. Bisexuality would thus no longer be invisible in works for children and young adults.

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Oxford: Hart Publishing.

B.J. Epstein is the author of over 160 articles, book reviews, personal essays, and short stories. Her new book, *Are the Kids All Right? Representations of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature*, was published in October. She previously published *Translating Expressive Language in Children's Literature* and *Ready, Set, Teach! Ready-Made Creative Classes for the English Classroom* and also was the editor of *Northern Lights: Translation in the Nordic Countries*. She is a lecturer in literature and public engagement at the University of East Anglia, and she is also a translator from the Scandinavian languages to English. More information about her can be found at [www.awaywithwords.se](http://www.awaywithwords.se).