



The LGBTQI+ Novel Comes Of Age

Article Author:

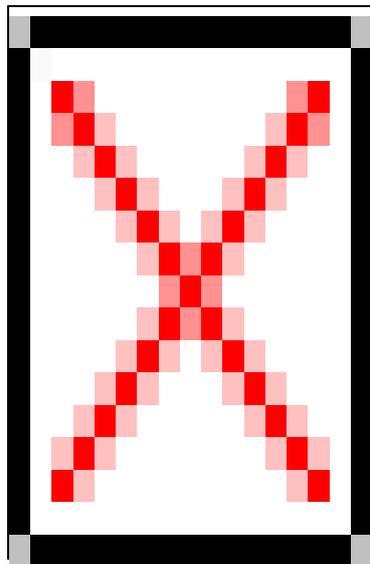
[Michael Lee Richardson](#) [1]

[235](#) [2]

Byline:

Michael Lee Richardson celebrates the best new writing for young LGBTQI+ readers.

Michael Lee Richardson celebrates the best new writing for young LGBTQI+ readers.



2019 marks 50 years since the Stonewall riots, the brutal protests by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people which took place in the early hours of 28th June 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Originally a demonstration against violent police raids, the riots are the reason we now have Pride during the summer, and are considered the catalyst for the current fight for LGBTQI+ liberation in the West.

In the same month, June 1969, John Donovan's **I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip** was published. Widely recognised as one of the first LGBT novels for young adult readers, **I'll Get There** follows Davy Ross, a 13 year old who finds himself moving back home with his alcoholic mother following his grandmother's death.

It's hardly cheery stuff, and Davy cuts a lonely figure until he meets Douglas, a classmate at his school. The two boys become fierce friends, eventually kissing and hugging while sharing a bed, with other, less easily smuggled past the radar activities hinted at (making out and doing it feature heavily).

LGBTQI+ literature for young adults has come a long way since Davy and Douglas making out, but some of the key themes - of love and relationships and self-discovery - remain the same today.

My own journey with LGBTQI+ YA began in 2003, with the publication of David Levithan's **Boy Meets Boy**, a riotous romantic comedy that takes the old trope of 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back' and tickles it pink.

Reading it as a 17 year old, **Boy Meets Boy** was a revelation, a queer story - in more ways than one - where all the tropes of LGBTQI+ YA past were turned on their heads. This wasn't a world where gay and lesbian characters (bisexual and transgender people barely existed in early 2000s YA) lived sad or secretive lives, usually dying before the

last page; this was a world peopled by people like me, where the 'boy meets boy' love story was almost mundane against a backdrop of cheerleaders on Harleys, a gay-straight alliance formed to help the straight kids learn how to dance, and a drag queen quarterback named Infinite Darlene.

One of the most exciting things about having my story *The Other Team* published in Stripes Publishing's [PROUD](#) [3] has been being featured alongside Levithan's own story, *As the Philadelphia Queer Youth Choir Sings Katy Perry's 'Firework'?*, a playful ensemble story about an LGBTQI+ ensemble, illustrated by Steve Anthony.

Compiled by [Juno Dawson](#) [4], [PROUD](#) [3] features a host of UK authors and illustrators who all identify as LGBTQI+ writing and illustrating on the theme of 'pride'.

The contents page is a good starting point for readers who want to read more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or just plain queer writers, and find more LGBTQI+ stories.

For someone like me, who loves Young Adult contemporary, standout stories include *Penguins* by Simon James Green, whose novels **Noah Can't Even** and **Noah Could Never** bring some much-needed levity to the queer literary experience; it is, as I've often iterated, absolutely excellent being gay.

Green's story is illustrated by Alice Oseman, whose own books and comics offer up whole casts of queer characters who run the gamut of gender identities and sexual orientations.

Other favourites include Moira Fowley-Doyle's *Love Poems to the City*, a timely story about the fight for marriage equality in Ireland, with a bisexual protagonist; and Fox Benwell's *The Courage of Dragons*, about a non-binary teenager and their Dungeons & Dragons group.

Having worked with LGBTQI+ young people for almost a decade - as a youth worker with LGBT Youth Scotland, and now for LEAP Sports, a charity which works for greater inclusion for LGBTI people in sport - the **PROUD** anthology represents communities I know and communities I'm part of (I'm queer, and I also play Dungeons & Dragons).

This is the type of book that I know the young people I work with will want to read, with characters like them and stories like theirs. In an increasingly difficult climate - not a week goes by when trans young people don't find their identities questioned or criticised in national newspapers in a way which echoes tabloid stories of 'perverted' lesbian and gay people in the 1980s - it's more important than ever that LGBTQI+ young people see themselves reflected in the country's cultural life and in our libraries, with positive role models both on and off the page.

For me, more trans representation remains a priority.

There have been excellent books with trans protagonists over the last few years: Lisa Williamson channeled her experiences as an administrator for the Tavistock Centre, a Gender Identity Clinic with a specific service for children and young people, into her book [The Art of Being Normal](#) [5], a witty, charming coming of age novel about a young trans woman coming out at school.

Alice Oseman thanks a long list of trans men who helped her research and write Jimmy Kaga-Ricci, a young trans man, one of two protagonists in her most recent novel, **I Was Born for This**, an absolute belter of a boyband book. Oseman also features a non-binary character - someone whose gender identity falls outside of traditional, binary notions of 'man' or 'woman' - in her novel **Radio Silence**.

Juno Dawson is a fantastic role model for trans young people, and I would love to see more trans writers writing for young adults. The same need for representation is true of young people with intersectional identities. 2019 has already seen the publication of Canadian author Sabina Khan's book **The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali**, about a young Muslim girl who is sent to live with her grandparents in Bangladesh after she's caught kissing her girlfriend and I'm particularly looking forward to **The Black Flamingo** by Dean Atta, whose poem *How to Come Out as Gay* rounds off the **PROUD** anthology. The novel in verse, about a mixed-race gay teenager coming to terms with his identity, tells the

story of the young protagonist creating his drag persona.

As young people are able to identify themselves as LGBTQI+ earlier and earlier, work for younger readers is going to become increasingly important. Alongside a handful of US titles - including Raina Telgemeier's **Drama** and **Better Nate Than Ever** by Tim Federle - standouts from UK authors include Keris Stainton's **Starring Kitty**, in which a light-hearted lesbian love story plays out against a backdrop of more serious themes of family crisis. **WAIN** - a collection of queer retellings of Scottish myths and legends (featuring gay giants, a trans boy Selkie and a non-binary Nessie) by Rachel Plummer - is published this month by The Emma Press. **The Pants Project**, about a young trans boy who has to fight his school dress code, by Scottish author Cat Clarke - who's also written books with LGBTQI+ protagonists and themes for young adults - has been published in the US, but is yet to find a UK publisher.

The publication last month of Lev Rosen's **Jack of Hearts (and Other Parts)** - which journalist Alim Kheraj has championed across a number of publications - feels like an exciting sign of things to come; a witty, charming and emotionally-charged story, which deals with sex and sexuality in a way that's frank and funny (sample line: 'My first time getting it in the butt was kind of weird?'). We've come a long way from Davy and Douglas 'making out', and books like **Jack of Hearts** and projects like **PROUD** feel like a taste of what's to come if LGBTQI+ writers are given the space to write for the communities we know and the communities we're a part of - and an exciting time for those of us who love it.

Michael Lee Richardson is a writer and youth worker based in Glasgow.

I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip, John Donovan, Golden Hoard Press, 978-0738721347, £7.60

Boy Meets Boy, David Levithan, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007533039, £7.99

PROUD, Various, Stripes, 978-1788950602, £7.99 pbk

Noah Can't Even, Simon James Green, Scholastic, 978-1407179940, £7.99 pbk

The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali, Sabina Khan, Egmont, 978-1407194578, £7.99

The Art of Being Normal, Lisa Williamson, David Fickling Books, 978-1910200520, £7.99 pbk

I Was Born for This, Alice Oseman, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0008244095, £7.99 pbk

Radio Silence Alice Oseman, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007559244, £7.99 pbk

Starring Kitty, Keris Stainton, Catnip Publishing, 978-1846471841, £7.99 pbk

WAIN, Rachel Plummer, the Emma Press, 978-1910139479, £12.00

Jack of Hearts (and Other Parts), L.C. Rosen, Penguin, 978-0241365014, £7.99 pbk

Page Number:

6

Source URL (retrieved on Jul '20): <http://savfikh.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/235/childrens-books/articles/the-lgbtqi-novel-comes-of-age>

Links:

[1] <http://savfikh.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/michael-lee-richardson>

[2] <http://savfikh.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/235>

[3] <http://savfikh.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/234/childrens-books/reviews/proud>

- [4] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/222/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-222-juno-dawson>
- [5] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/210/childrens-books/reviews/the-art-of-being-normal>