

Review

Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture.

Derritt Mason.

University Press of Mississippi, 2020.

Robert Bittner

Derritt Mason writes in his Introduction to *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture*, “I hope to move beyond a conception of queer YA as a literary genre grounded in visibility and coherent sexual identity, arguing instead for an affective trans-media approach that complicates and enhances the way we [...] think and write about queer YA, children’s literature, and genre” (18). Mason opens his examination of YA literature and culture by highlighting the work of Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham, noting that the “important work of positively role modeling gay youth and properly educating heterosexual readers [...] is undone by the persistent twinning of homosexuality and hopelessness” (3). As educators, librarians, scholars, and other critics of YA literature work to evaluate queer representation within the field, some, such as Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, make note of the belief that queer literature can and should continue to grow and improve, that the anxieties which have existed for decades can be addressed and fixed, creating a literature that is positive and helpful. Mason argues, “YA critics desire a version of the genre that will provide young readers with the fictional role models ostensibly necessary to their thriving. For queer YA’s

Robert Bittner has a PhD in Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies from Simon Fraser University, as well as an MA in Children’s Literature from the University of British Columbia. His work spans many areas of queer and trans studies but mostly focuses on children’s and young adult literature. When not writing about LGBTQ+ literature for youth, he works on committees and award juries for the American Library Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and is currently serving as the President of the BC and Yukon Book Prizes Society.

young protagonists, however, the future is often managed by anxiously delaying its arrival” (14). It is this tension between the desire for forward movement and the stalling of the present, while looking to an uncertain queer future, that Mason turns to throughout the remainder of the text.

Mason employs Kathryn Bond Stockton’s theory of the sideways-growing queer child, combined with Sara Ahmed’s model of affective economy, to explore meaning-making, not as a product of the texts, but rather as a result of the relationships between the reader, the text, and larger discourse around queerness and adolescence. For Mason, “anxiety is not embedded in the text or its characters themselves, but it surfaces instead from the text’s circulation in a web of discourse about queer youth, adolescence, pedagogy, the role of fiction and literature, and queer theories of childhood” (15). Mason looks to understand anxiety in relation to the definition of queer YA as something beyond print-based literature and a definable type of story: “what I call ‘queer YA’”, Mason tells us, “is not a set of narrative conventions, a marketing label, or anything reducible in content” (16). Mason’s introduction serves to trouble many assumptions that are often made in relation to queer YA, and in doing so, opens up the possibilities for critical engagement with texts – including online media, television, games, and more – beyond those that explicitly include a queer protagonist.

The bulk of the text explores anxieties and blurred boundaries in a number of works, including print literature, television shows, online videos, and fanfiction. The first two chapters serve to complicate existing understandings of early queer YA, namely that these novels are too harmful or stereotypical. And while it is true that many early examples of queer YA do rely on negative consequences experienced by children and youth who exhibit gender or sexuality in any way contrary to social norms, that does not mean these texts are unable to function as sites of affective exploration, critiques of historical inequalities, and as informative spaces for examining queer history. In these chapters, Mason engages with two primary texts: John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) and Isabelle Holland’s *The Man Without a Face* (1972). In the overall flow of the book, the first chapter feels less sure of its direction, becoming preoccupied with a singular focus on the metaphors and anxieties related to the protagonist’s relationship with his dog. Chapter Two, however, comes back to the core arguments Mason began with in his Introduction, focusing on what it means for queer youth to be categorised as “at risk” (46) and the anxieties produced from that categorisation, including the potential for increased victimisation.

Following from this, the third chapter examines HIV/AIDS as “a source of tremendous anxiety for YA authors and critics, to the extent that the virus has been generally invisible in the literature” (20). Referencing David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) and C. M. Ralph’s video game *Caper in the Castro* (1989), Mason invites readers to “consider how affect associated with failure [...] tends to dominate discourse about HIV/AIDS in the context of young people’s culture” (21). By engaging with texts about failure and loss, Mason contends that readers can open up new relational networks that entail “more accurate representations

of how HIV/AIDS endures in the present and remains an influential force in the lives of many young people” (21). In the last chapter on print-based queer YA, Mason aims his sights on Andrew Smith’s *Grasshopper Jungle* (2014), interrogating the limits of sex on the page when it comes to protagonist Austin’s physically intimate experiences with his best friend, Robbie. Mason points out that the novel’s “excessive rendering of YA’s storm, stress, darkness and violence ironically makes visible the novel’s unwillingness to confront the unbearability associated with queer sex” (21). Along with a thorough interrogation of the text itself, Mason also examines the ways in which YA scholars and critics approach the notions of storm, stress, darkness, and violence themselves.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven touch on work outside of print literature, including Netflix’s animated series *Big Mouth* (2017-present) through which Mason examines camp queerness, and the effectiveness of the show at dethroning shame, anxiety, and horror; Dan Savage and Terry Miller’s *It Gets Better* YouTube project (2010-present), which is explored alongside considerations of futurity and impossibility; and fanfiction addressing *It Gets Better* and *Glee* (2009-2015), through explorations of anxiety, desire, and the role of youth as producers of content apart from adult anxieties and desires. These chapters encourage scholars, educators, and critics to consider representations and interrogations of queerness beyond books, as well as looking at the ways in which adaptations of cultural texts challenge scholars to widen their theoretical approaches to the study of YA literature and culture.

In his concluding chapter, Mason reflects on the anxieties of adult critics who consciously or unconsciously leave no space for examination or engagement with early queer YA texts: “Critics remain determined to pin down the pedagogical function of children’s and YA literature, a rehearsal that points to the shaky foundation of the genre itself” (179). Additionally, Mason points out that critics “remain consistently anxious about the status of ‘growing up,’ who’s doing it, who’s doing it *properly*, and who seems to be failing” (177). It is true that these obsessions with pedagogical function and the status of growing up are a symptom of a desire to look at queer YA in a practical sense (something that educators and librarians do often, and for good reason). But this is often done without fully understanding or applying theoretical possibilities which can help to unlock new and exciting ways of understanding queer YA, the anxieties that drive it, and the studies influenced by its existence and increases in its production.

Queer Anxieties in Young Adult Literature and Culture has the potential to shift the focus in multiple fields and disciplines away from strict definitions and a linear trajectory of ‘bad’ representation to ‘good’ representation. Mason’s thoughtful, in-depth, and provocative arguments will give educators, scholars, librarians, and YA critics in general much to consider and apply to future research in the field, as well as to the broader field of cultural studies. *Queer Anxieties* is a text with the potential to inform and energise scholars (new or established) and build a more nuanced and expansive understanding of the possibilities for reading, teaching, and studying queer YA literature. Mason writes in the Conclusion, “[t]his

anxiety, as I have argued, presents not only a point of entry into this critical conversation, but also the tools for fashioning and alternative method for approaching and engaging with a range of cultural artifacts – including, but not limited to, the unceasingly anxious genre of queer YA” (179). I, too, hope that readers of this text can embrace the anxious nature of queer YA and move beyond simplistic conceptualisations of its didactic possibilities.

REFERENCES

- Cart, Michael, and Christine A. Jenkins. *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*. Scarecrow Press, 2006.
- Jenkins, Christine A., and Michael Cart. *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.