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Drawing Queerness: Evaluating Notable LGBTQ Graphic Novels for Teens

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Abstract

Despite the current growth of graphic novel popularity with teens and the increasing representation of the LGBTQ community in those graphic novels, there has been little work done to evaluate these works in terms of how the LGBTQ characters are presented. Using Jenkins's adaptations of Lerner's, Bishop's, and Chauncey's frameworks—as well as Jenkins's own framework that combined these three for use with LGBTQ adolescent literature—the authors tested whether these frameworks were suitable for evaluating LGBTQ graphic novels for teens. Graphic novels deemed exemplary through their inclusion on the Rainbow List, Stonewall Awards, and Lambda Literary Awards were examined. Findings indicated that while these graphic novels offer positive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals, they are lacking in racial and sexual diversity. In addition, the frameworks proved highly useful but not totally sufficient for analyzing graphic materials.

Introduction

Almost twenty years ago, Christine Jenkins published a groundbreaking article that analyzed young adult novels with gay/lesbian/queer content that had appeared between 1969 and 1997.[1] Employing three critical frameworks from other scholars, as well as her own, Jenkins examined approximately one hundred novels to determine the extent to which gay/lesbian/queer characters and their experiences were portrayed realistically. She concluded that while there was evidence of progress over the nearly thirty-year time span, there was still much to be done. Fast-forward to

the present, when young adult novels are thriving, and more and more appear each year with LGBTQ content. In the years since Jenkins's study, graphic novels have also become popular, including graphic novels for young adults. Not surprisingly, some of these graphic novels contain LGBTQ content. The question arises, then, to what extent are graphic novels with LGBTQ content providing realistic portrayals of LGBTQ characters and people?[2] We set out to answer that question by examining graphic novels with LGBTQ content that have been recognized and recommended as noteworthy. Specifically, we looked for graphic novels with LGBTQ content that have been designated Stonewall Award winners or honor books, received a Lambda Literary Award, and/or been named to the Rainbow List.

The Stonewall Book Awards—facilitated by the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT) of ALA—have been awarded since 1971, but a category for children's and young adult books was not added until 2010. It was named in 2012 for Mike Morgan and Larry Romans in honor of their financial support of the awards. To be eligible, a book must contain "exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience" and be published in English within the calendar year prior to the award announcements.[3] There is no specific category within the Stonewall Awards for graphic novels, for either adults or children, and inclusion of these in the awards is primarily based on the level of quality and what other texts they are up against for the award year. This is reflected in the list of books examined here, as only two were Stonewalls, and both of those were honor books rather than winners.

The Rainbow List, also facilitated through the GLBTRT since 2008, was originally a joint project with the Social Responsibilities Round Table and "presents an annual bibliography of quality books with significant and authentic GLBTQ content, which are recommended for people from birth through eighteen years of age."[4] It is intended to be a recommendation list for librarians, teachers, and readers, and therefore is much lengthier and more diverse in terms of where the characters fall along the LGBTQ spectrum, genre, and reading level. It is further broken down into general categories: for example, Juvenile Fiction, Young Adult Nonfiction, and Graphic Novels—though Graphic Novels has only been a separate category since 2010, and, even then, some years they are placed into the Fiction or Nonfiction category. The vast majority of the books examined here were culled from the Rainbow List.

In building the list of books, we also looked at the Lambda Literary Awards, a branch of the Lambda Literary Foundation. This award is intended to "identify and celebrate the best lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender books of the year and affirm that LGBTQ stories are part of the literature of the world."[5] It features twenty-five separate categories, including LGBT Graphic Novel; however, the winners of this award are not restricted to children's and young adult literature, and so were mostly not relevant to our research. It is worth noting that two of the books in this study, *Fun Home* and *Calling Dr. Laura*, received Lambda Awards in addition to being included on the Rainbow List.

Research Questions

In analyzing the LGBTQ graphic novels we culled from the three lists, we sought to address the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the bibliographic characteristics of these books?

RQ 2: What are the demographic characteristics of the characters/people in these books?

RQ 3: What does the application of Jenkins's four frameworks reveal about the contents of these books?

RQ 4: What are the outcomes of the LGBTQ characters in these books?

In answering these questions, the usefulness of the frameworks, both individually and as applied by Jenkins, in evaluating graphic novels was examined, and our own additions to the frameworks tested in terms of evaluating whether the graphic novels realistically portray the LGBTQ community. Though Jenkins was specifically evaluating LGBTQ literature, her framework failed to include such details as to whether the LGBTQ characters were primary or secondary, whether LGBTQ relationships were presented and how, and what the outcomes of the LGBTQ characters were (although she does discuss the history of tragic endings for LGBTQ young adult characters). We have added these criteria as well as notations on the art style of the books and the age and ethnicity of the LGBTQ characters.

Literature Review

A number of scholars have examined the portrayal of various minority groups, including LGBTQ individuals, in young adult books. In addition to Jenkins's groundbreaking article discussed at the beginning of this essay, Michael Cart and Jenkins have published a book-length study, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004.*[6] Here Cart and Jenkins celebrate the advances made but also issue a call to action: "We clearly need more GLBTQ books featuring characters of color, more lesbian and bisexual characters, more transgender youth, and more characters with same-sex parents."[7] In a more recent study, Talya Sokoll found only eight books that are readily available and that portray teens who specifically identify as transgender, so it appears that only a very little progress has been made in that respect.[8] A few studies have focused on picture books with LGBTQ content. Kay Chick, for example, surveys several picture books featuring gay and lesbian characters, and she argues that such books can promote an appreciation for different kinds of families.[9] While her focus is on picture books intended for young children rather than young adults, Chick's observations about stereotypical illustrations and content versus more nuanced representations apply equally to illustrated books for young adults. Similarly, Jane Sunderland and Mark McGlashan have analyzed picture books looking for representations of same-sex parents.[10] They found that picture books tended to portray gay and lesbian sexuality in general positive terms;

however, mothers tended to be portrayed as co-parents (with emphasis on their role as parents), while fathers tended to be portrayed more as partners (with emphasis on their relationship with each other). Recently, scholars have turned their attention to LGBTQ characters and themes in graphic novels for children and teens. Cart and Jenkins devote only one page to graphic novels and comics in their book-length study, *The Heart Has Its Reasons*.[11] However, several of the essays in Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox's *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults: A Collection of Critical Essays* discuss LGBTQ issues in comics and graphic novels.[12] Eti Berland, for example, examines the various attempts to censor Raina Telgemeier's *Drama* because of its depiction of gay characters. Rachel Dean-Ruzicka discusses how the Lumberjanes comic book series, which includes two lesbian adolescent characters, portrays feminist power based on collectivism rather than individualism. And Marni Stanley argues that Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim*, which features a protagonist in a same-sex relationship, and *This One Summer* portray adolescent girls with rich, complex inner lives, but who are nevertheless struggling to understand the social issues of the world around them with little help from the adults in their lives.

Several studies have examined the portrayal of other minority groups in graphic novels. Frederick Luis Aldama's *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* is a collection of essays by various scholars who discuss how graphic narratives have depicted race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.[13] Michael A. Sheyahshe's *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study* analyzes the often negative and stereotypical portrayal of Native Americans in graphic narratives, both historically and in contemporary works.[14] And Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen's *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* offers a collection of twelve essays by different scholars examining the depiction of various kinds of disabilities.[15] Similarly, Deborah Elizabeth Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* and Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II's *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* analyze the portrayal and tropes present in comics featuring African American characters.[16]

Methods

The corpus of books examined were the graphic novels culled from the Stonewall Book Awards and Honor Books and the Rainbow Lists, with a resulting total of 31 books. By far most of the books (30) appeared on the Rainbow List. Two of the 31 books were Stonewall Honor Books; none of the Stonewall Award winners were graphic novels. One book (Telgemeier's *Drama*) was both a Stonewall Honor Book and a Rainbow List book, and another book (Merey's *a + e 4ever*) was a Stonewall Honor Book but did not appear on the Rainbow List. A list of the 31 books is provided in Appendix A. All of the books were read by both researchers. The researchers coded the books independently and then compared coding on all categories with all of the books. In the cases where the researchers disagreed on the initial coding, the coding was discussed and consensus was achieved. In coding the books, the researchers used a holistic approach,

considering images and text together. In graphic novels, images and text are integral to each other, so in this study we analyzed them essentially as a single unit.

The frameworks for coding were adopted from Jenkins's study of young adult books with gay/lesbian/queer content, and additional categories were developed for inclusion. Jenkins herself adapted three previous frameworks for her own purposes. Gerda Lerner's Model of Women's Historiography employs five levels for describing how women are depicted in historiography. Level 0 is invisibility. Level 1 includes women in a compensatory way, focusing on women's contributions to history. Level 2 focuses on oppression of and discrimination against women in history. Level 3 looks at women's cultural history, and Level 4, the most inclusive, considers women in history.[17] Jenkins adapted the framework by substituting "LGBTQ people" for "women" and "young adult literature" for "history."

Jenkins also adapted Rudine Sims Bishop's Model for African American Inclusion in Children's Books, focusing instead on LGBTQ inclusion and adolescent books. Bishop identified three levels of children's books, based on the way in which African American characters were included in the books. Level 1 books are called "social conscience books," those that emphasize the way whites viewed blacks or, in other cases, the way blacks viewed whites. Level 2 works are "melting pot books," in which people are portrayed as being basically the same, regardless of race. And Level 3, "culturally conscious books," are books in which lives and experiences are told from within the culture.[18]

Jenkins also employed and adapted George Chauncey's Myths of Isolation, Invisibility, and Internalization, based on his study of pre-Stonewall gay men in New York City. These three levels refer to the myths that (1) gay men in pre-Stonewall New York were isolated from one another, (2) that they were invisible, even to one another, and (3) that they internalized a feeling of inferiority, of being defective.[19] In adapting this framework, Jenkins looked at the degree to which LGBTQ characters in adolescent books reflected any (or all) of these traits.

Finally, Jenkins developed her own framework of Common Threads and Recurring Issues. Here she considered three main issues: (1) questions of authenticity and realism in the depiction of LGBTQ lives and experiences, (2) the depiction of the relationship between LGBTQ adults and children in traditional families, and (3) the depiction of difference (or no difference) in understandings of sexual identity and LGBTQ people.[20]

We adopted Jenkins's four coding frameworks for our study. In addition, we coded the books according to genre, whether they were part of a series, artistic style of the illustrations, whether the main character was LGBTQ, whether other characters were LGBTQ, whether LGBTQ relationships were depicted, the ethnicity of the main character, the age of the LGBTQ characters, whether other minority characters were represented, the gender/gender identity of the main character, and the outcome of the characters. The complete coding frameworks are provided in Appendix B.

Findings

Bibliographic Characteristics of the Graphic Novels

In examining the basic bibliographic characteristics of each of the books, three elements were considered: (1) genre, (2) whether or not the book was part of a series, and (3) artistic style. Among the 31 graphic novels that constituted the corpus of this study, six genres are represented: approximately one-third are fiction (not manga or superhero); the remainder are divided equally among manga, superhero, and memoir, with the exception of one biography and four anthologies, of which two can be considered fiction (*Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Beyond: The Queer Sci-Fi and Fantasy Comic Anthology*) and the other two nonfiction/advice (*Not Your Mother's Meatloaf* and *The Secret Loves of Geek Girls*). Slightly fewer than half of the graphic novels in the study are part of a series. In terms of artistic style, approximately half can be considered examples of a realistic style, while the other half are in more of a cartoon style or in the style associated with manga, with three (three of the four anthologies) containing a mix of styles as might be expected with multiple illustrators.[21] These findings are summarized in Tables 1, 2, and 3 below.

Table 1: Genre

Genre	Frequency
Anthology	4
Biography	1
Fiction (not manga or superhero)	11
Manga	5
Memoir	5
Superhero	5

Table 2: Volumes in a Series

Volume in a series	Frequency
Yes	14
No	17

Table 3: Artistic Style

Artistic style	Frequency
Cartoon	9
Manga	5
Mixed	3
Realism	14

Character Demographics

In examining the demographics of the characters represented in the books, several elements were considered: whether the main character is LGBTQ, whether other LGBTQ characters are depicted, and whether LGBTQ relationships are depicted; the ethnicity of the main character and of other characters; the gender/gender identity of the main character; and the age of the LGBTQ characters. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the books depict main characters who are LGBTQ. Only two do not, while four (three of the anthologies and the ensemble book *Lumberjanes*) cannot be said to really have a single main character. Also, a large majority of the books feature other characters who are LGBTQ. Only two do not. Interestingly, though, only about 60 percent of the books depict LGBTQ relationships. These findings are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4: LGBTQ Portrayals

LGBTQ portrayals	Yes	No	Maybe	Not applicable
Main character LGBTQ	25	2	0	4
Other characters LGBTQ	24	2	4	1
LGBTQ relationships	19	12	—	—

Ethnic diversity is represented among the main characters, but perhaps less than might be expected. Among the books with a single main character, approximately half are white, with the next most frequently represented group (approximately 16 percent) being Asian or Asian American. A little over half of the books do represent other minority characters. It should be noted that one book (*SuperMutant Magic Academy*) features mutants, which makes it difficult to apply standard criteria related to ethnicity. These findings are summarized in Tables 5 and 6 below.

Table 5: Ethnicity of Main Character

Ethnicity of main character	Frequency
African American/Black	0
Asian/Asian American	5
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	1
Multiple	9
White	15
Other	1 (*Mutant*)

Note: Some books feature more than one main/queer character, and different ethnicities are represented among these characters, although the majority of them are white.

Table 6: Other Minority Characters Represented

Other minority characters	Frequency
Yes	17
No	13
Not applicable	1 (*Mutant*)

Of the main characters depicted in these graphic novels, approximately two-thirds are female, with the remainder being male, transgender, or various. Though it is encouraging to see the representation of transgender characters, it must be noted that all four books with trans *main* characters are within the same series (Wandering Son), and so ultimately it is only one among the data set. (Janis in Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* comes out as trans, but *DTWOF* is a comic strip with multiple characters and story lines, and therefore is not included in this number.) Given that this is a very limited data set, this does not necessarily mean that trans characters are as absent as this in the broader world of comics and graphic novels. However, since the Stonewall Awards and Rainbow List do serve as collection development tools, this is potentially problematic anyway. In terms of age, more than half of the LGBTQ characters (not just LGBTQ main characters) are teenagers, with the majority of the remaining LGBTQ characters being adults. The intended readership of the graphic novels in this study ranges from elementary school (e.g., *Princess Princess Ever After*, which is listed as appropriate for grades 2 and up) to upper high school (e.g., *The Secret Loves of Geek Girls*, listed as appropriate for grades 10 and up). The vast majority are intended for teenagers, with some listed as appropriate for tweens. While these age ranges, of course, do not actually restrict the age of readers, it is of note that the books are mostly intended for an older audience. Children who are tweens or younger are much less likely to find queer characters their own age in graphic novels, if this sample is representative. There are few representations of what we have labeled "tweens" and no representations of LGBTQ characters younger than this range. Teens and adults are well represented, not only in these graphic novels but in general literature. It is much more difficult to locate LGBTQ characters below the age of ten or eleven, particularly non-trans or non-gender nonconforming characters.

There are many newer picture books that present LGBTQ people of elementary school age—*Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* and *I Am Jazz*, for instance—but these are more likely to feature trans or gender-nonconforming characters than other LGBTQ identities.[22] According to Ritch Savin-Williams and Lisa Diamond, the age at which people realize their LGBTQ identity tends to fall between eight and ten, varying by gender, and the age of coming out has been steadily falling, with the average age dropping from twenty or older in the 1980s to around seventeen in the 2000s.[23] These younger members of the LGBTQ community need to see representations of themselves just as older members do, but they are seemingly the least represented in literature. Further research would be needed to determine whether this is true or

whether it is an anomaly present in this data set. These findings are summarized in Tables 7, 8, and 9 below.

Table 7: Gender of Main Character

Gender of main character	Frequency
Female	20
Male	10
Trans	4 (all part of Wandering Son series)

Note: In the case where a book had more than one main character, if both genders were represented among the characters, each was counted once.

Table 8: Gender Identity/Sexuality of Main Character

Gender identity/sexuality	Frequency
Gay	8
Lesbian	9
Bisexual	4
Transgender	4 (all *Wandering Son*)
Queer/Genderqueer	2
Multiple	4 (anthologies)
Gender identity/sexuality	**Frequency**

Table 9: Age of LGBTQ Characters

Age of LGBTQ characters	Frequency
Tweens	1
Teens	17
Adults	9
Variable	4

Outcomes and Situations of Characters

In considering the situations and the outcomes of the characters, Jenkins's four frameworks were used (Lerner's, Bishop's, Chauncey's, and Jenkins's own) along with an assessment of whether the characters' outcomes are positive, negative, or mixed.

Outcomes and Situations—Lerner: As Jenkins explains, Gerda Lerner's Model of Women's Historiography describes various levels of scholarly perspectives on women's inclusion in historiography. Using Lerner's conceptual framework, Suzanne Hildebrand developed five levels to describe scholarship on women specifically in library history. The five levels are (0) invisibility, (1) compensatory or contributions history, (2) discrimination or oppression history,

(3) women's cultural history, and (4) women in history. It is this framework that Jenkins adopts for her own purposes in examining the portrayal of LGBTQ characters in young adult books, essentially replacing "women" in the schema with "LGBTQ characters."[24] In applying this framework, as modified by Jenkins, we discovered that in none of the graphic novels could the portrayal of LGBTQ characters only be considered invisible or compensatory. Approximately 22 percent depict oppression as part of the LGBTQ experience, while nearly 45 percent depict LGBTQ people in history. In a number of cases, multiple levels are evident. For example, 22 percent of the books contain elements of both LGBTQ oppression and LGBTQ people in history. Two books were coded as having (0) invisibility and (2) oppression (*Stuck Rubber Baby* and *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets*). *Stuck Rubber Baby* is a historical graphic novel, telling the story of the lives of LGBTQ people in the Deep South during the Civil Rights era; it would have been strange *not* to find invisibility and oppression represented in this book. However, *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* is a contemporary tale with a similarly oppressive tone and tragic occurrences. The findings are summarized in the Table 10 below.

Table 10: Lerner's Framework as Adapted by Jenkins

Lerner's framework (adapted)	Frequency
0 (invisible)	0
1 (compensatory)	0
2 (oppression)	7
3 (LGBTQ cultural history)	0
4 (LGBTQ people in history)	14
0, 2	2
0, 3	1
2, 4	7

Outcomes and Situations—Bishop: Jenkins also uses Rudine Sims Bishop's Model for African American Inclusion in Children's Books, adapting it to focus on the inclusion of LGBTQ characters in adolescent books. Bishop identified three basic types of books published in the years immediately following the Civil Rights movement and in which African American characters appeared: social conscience books focus on the problems of race and segregation; melting pot books portray an integrated society in which all people are basically the same; and culturally conscious books depict African American characters in a culturally sensitive and accurate way. As Jenkins demonstrates, Bishop's framework can be usefully adapted and applied to the portrayal of LGBTQ characters in books for teens.[25]

In applying this framework to the graphic novels in our study, we found that far and away most of the books fell into the culturally conscious category. Only one book could be described as a melting pot book (Telgemeier's *Drama*). Bishop describes these types of books as those "that concentrate on the idea that people are people are people. . . . The implication is that Americans have all been placed in the proverbial melting pot and have emerged homogenous and

culturally interchangeable." She identifies the primary problem with this group of books quite simply: "They not only make a point of recognizing our universality, but . . . also make a point of ignoring our differences."[26] The gay characters in *Drama* are secondary and present in the spotlight only because they are friends with the main character, Callie. They are both gay and visibly non-white and are forcefully presented as being just like everyone else. This can be seen as positive: the gay characters have crushes and go about middle school life as other tweens would without being seen as problematic. However, this sort of representation also erases any cultural markers of the LGBTQ community and creates an expectation that all LGBTQ people will be the same. Similar issues have been noted when discussing the emphasis on passing for trans characters. The findings are summarized in Table 11 below.

Table 11: Bishop's Framework as Adapted by Jenkins

Bishop's framework (adapted)	Frequency
1 (social conscience)	5
2 (melting pot)	1
3 (culturally conscious)	25

Outcomes and Situations—Chauncey: Jenkins also adapts and employs George Chauncey's Myths of Isolation, Invisibility, and Internalization from his study of the pre-Stonewall gay community in New York City. While Chauncey argues that these myths did not apply to many of the men in his study, Jenkins notes that those myths are still evident in much literature for teens.[27] In applying Chauncey's myths framework to the books in our study, we found that approximately 67 percent of the books contain no portrayals of these myths whatsoever. However, this means that over 30 percent of the books do contain portrayals of these myths, often in combination. The most frequent combination was invisibility (2) and internalization (3), found in *Fun Home*, *Gotham Central*, and *Honor Girl.* The findings are summarized in Table 12 below.

Table 12: Chauncey's Framework

Chauncey's framework	Frequency
None	21
1 (isolation)	1
2 (invisibility)	0
3 (internalization)	1
1, 2	0
1, 3	2
2, 3	3
1, 2, 3	2

Outcomes and Situations—Jenkins: Finally, Jenkins offers her own framework for analysis, based on what she calls "common threads and recurring issues." Three key issues emerge: the degree to which LGBTQ people are portrayed realistically and authentically; the degree to which LGBTQ people are portrayed as part of families and, particularly, as part of children's lives; and the degree to which LGBTQ people are portrayed as being different from straight people.[28] We found that nearly 50 percent of the graphic novels in our study scored high marks on authenticity, while another 32 percent scored high marks on both authenticity and portraying LGBTQ people as being different from straight people in some important ways. Only three of the ten books with these markers (authenticity plus LGBTQ characters depicted as different) were also coded as having internalization on the Chauncey framework (*Adrian and the Tree of Secrets*, *Honor Girl*, and *Gotham Central*). In these, the notion of LGBTQ people as different seems to be centered in disapproving family or other characters, though the LGBTQ characters in these books also seem to be exhibiting these ideas. The other seven books in this group more clearly represent what Jenkins intended with this category: LGBTQ people as being different from heterosexual people in cultural ways, as one would note with ethnic minorities. The findings are summarized in Table 13.

Table 13: Jenkins's Framework

Jenkins's framework	Frequency
1 (authenticity)	15
2 (rel. b/t LGBTQ char. & children)	0
3 (LGBTQ people different)	0
1, 2	4
1, 3	10
2, 3	0
1, 2, 3	1
None	0
Not applicable	1

Outcomes of LGBTQ Characters

The final aspect of the graphic novels that we examined was the outcomes of the LGBTQ characters, both main characters and secondary. As Jenkins points out, the early "new realism" of adolescent literature generally means no happy endings in an attempt to provide a more "realistic" portrait of the world, giving us the so-called "problem novel."[29] However, in LGBTQ YA novels, this takes on an entirely different sort of meaning. From the earliest LGBTQ YA novels up until the publication of Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind*, the unwritten rule was that LGBTQ characters could not have a happy ending to their story.[30] Suicide, heartbreak, abandonment, and isolation were common in these stories, primarily to prevent outcry from parents and other adults; if the "lifestyle" is painted in a negative light, it cannot be said to be promoted by the book. More recent LGBTQ YA literature has stepped away from this trope, and

many stories end with happy and steady relationships, both with romantic partners and the character's family and peers.[31]

In coding these graphic novels, we defined "outcome" as what the LGBTQ character's life looks like at the end, whether the fact of their LGBTQ identity led to a tragic end or not. The outcomes are positive in slightly more than 40 percent of the books. In about half of the books, the outcomes are mixed, meaning that the ending point of the story may not be a fairy-tale happy ending, but it could not be defined as negative or tragic. The two most clearly negative outcomes are found in *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* and *The Imitation Game. The Imitation Game*, a biography of Alan Turing, has little leeway in how the story is presented; Turing's life was tragic, a result of being LGBTQ in much more unforgiving times. His oppression and death were unavoidable in terms of writing about his life. The tragedy in *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets*, however, is entirely a product of story. Tragedies also present themselves in *Stuck Rubber Baby* and *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, though they are not counted here—the former because the tragedy is separate from the main character and the latter because of the nebulous nature of the character's death. *Stuck Rubber Baby* is similar to *Imitation Game* in that, as a historical graphic novel, it is almost necessary to present such events to draw as clear a picture as possible of the time. An interesting note is that *Adrian* and *Blue*, the two contemporary fictional stories in this group, were both originally published in French (*Adrian* in Canada and *Blue* in France) and were only later translated for the U.S. market. There is no solid connection between the language of first printing and these tragic endings, but it would be interesting future research to examine translated graphic novels to determine whether this is a common theme. The findings are summarized in Table 14 below.

Table 14: Outcomes of LGBTQ Characters

Outcomes	Frequency
Positive	13
Negative	2 (*Adrian* and *The Imitation Game*)
Mixed	15
Not Applicable	1 (*Meatloaf*)

Discussion

Considering that the graphic novels examined in this study were selected for the Rainbow List or named a Stonewall Honor Book, it might be expected that these books would offer positive and diverse portrayals of the LGBTQ experience. Certainly, a variety of genres is represented, including superhero, manga, other kinds of fiction, memoir, advice, and biography. Not surprisingly, approximately three-fourths of the books are fiction, reflecting the general trend for juvenile book sales.[32] What is surprising is the small number of superhero and manga titles on the list. A visit to the graphic novel section of any bookstore will confirm the enormous popularity of superhero and manga titles in general. Perhaps relatively few titles with LGBTQ

content are being published in these genres, or perhaps most of what is being published is not considered by the Rainbow List committees to be list-worthy. Future research may be able to shed more light on this apparent gap.

The books depict diversity among the characters in some respects but not in others. For example, most of the books feature a main character who is LGBTQ and also other characters who are LGBTQ. Approximately two-thirds of the books depict LGBTQ relationships. However, a closer look reveals that most of the LGBTQ characters are in fact lesbian characters with only a few gay male characters represented. This is in contrast to what Jenkins found in her study, where gay male characters outnumbered lesbian characters three to one.[33] Very few of the books in our study contain bisexual or transgender characters. *The Secret Loves of Geek Girls* is important in this set in that it contains a representation of demisexuality, which—along with asexuality and genderqueerness/non-binary identities—is nearly nonexistent in adolescent literature.

In terms of race and ethnicity, most of the main characters are white, although there are Asian and Asian American main characters as well. It is surprising—and unfortunate—that so few of the characters are Latinx or black. A little over half of the books do feature minority (i.e., non-white) characters among the secondary characters, but in some cases these characters play very small roles or are only seen in the background. For instance, the Kevin Keller books do have one African American couple in them, but they are visible only in the background and do not play a role in the actual story. They serve as diverse set dressing for the overwhelmingly white cast. Similarly, Jenkins found that among the books in her study, the characters are predominantly white.[34]

As for gender diversity, approximately two-thirds of the books in our study feature female main characters, while one-third feature male main characters. Four of the books have transgender main characters, but it should be noted that all of these books are in the Wandering Son series. Finally, diversity is seen among the ages of the LGBTQ characters. Most are teens, which is not surprising given the intended audience for the majority of these books, but adults and tweens are also represented among the LGBTQ characters. Overall, the books do an admirable job in depicting diversity among the characters, with the significant exceptions of Latinx, black, and transgender characters. *Dykes to Watch Out For* is the only one of the books examined to have any major representation of disability within the LGBTQ community. This is a problem in literature in general, but finding LGBTQ characters with disabilities presented in a positive light is akin to locating a unicorn. This data set, though small, is actually accurate in the frequency of this particular identity intersection.

Using the analytical frameworks that Jenkins adapted and employed in her study reveals that almost half the books in our study reflect positive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals and the LGBTQ experience. About half of the books, for example, fall into Lerner's "in history" category, meaning they portray LGBTQ individuals and experiences simply as a facet of the

human experience—in other words, as completely acceptable, nothing out of the ordinary. Some of the books depict the oppression of LGBTQ individuals, which admittedly is a part of the LGBTQ experience, especially for people of a certain age and/or people living in certain places. Other books show both oppression and LGBTQ individuals in history. In these books, the oppression often comes from particular individuals (a parent, for instance) rather than the community or society as a whole. Perhaps this is due to the fact that oppression deriving from close members of the characters' families and/or social circles is easier to depict in words and images than a more general and broadly defined societal oppression. Analysis of current adolescent novels is needed to determine whether this is specific to graphic novels or simply a trend across adolescent genres.

By way of comparison, Jenkins found that Lerner's four stages were reflected in roughly chronological order in the nearly three decades' worth of books she analyzed. Early books, for instance, tended to present gay and lesbian characters as going through a stage on the way to heterosexual adulthood, while later books featured gay and lesbian characters as simply part of the diverse range of human experience—although these characters were rarely shown as being part of a larger LGBTQ community. Along the way, a number of books in Jenkins's corpus depicted acts of oppression, including gay bashing, ostracism, and even death.[35]

In relation to Jenkins's adaptation of Bishop's framework, almost all of the books in our study demonstrate a culturally conscious approach to depicting LGBTQ individuals, arguably the most nuanced and positive kind of portrayal—one based on attention to accuracy and sensitivity. A small number of books reflect a social conscience approach in that they dealt with the problems and issues of being an LGBTQ individual trying to exist within and navigate mainstream society. Only one book (*Drama* by Raina Telgemeier) was classified as a melting pot book—that is, a book suggesting there are no fundamental differences between straight people and their experiences, and LGBTQ people and their experiences. The gay characters in *Drama* blend seamlessly into the background of the story without making any distinctions between them and the rest of characters, although this may be more related to the fact that they are not the main focus of the story and are essentially playing a role in the main character's tale. The only other books marked as not having an LGBTQ main character were anthologies and the lone book *Tomboy*, which did not really discuss sexual orientation, so there is no way to determine whether this is true of all graphic novels with secondary LGBTQ characters with the current set of subjects. In contrast, Jenkins found that most of the books she examined reflected a social conscience perspective, in which gay and lesbian characters wait patiently for acceptance from their straight counterparts, or they reflected a melting pot perspective, in which gay and lesbian characters are depicted as being exactly like straight people except for their sexual attraction. As Jenkins says, in these kinds of books, "the closet is mandatory for peaceful coexistence."[36] As for culturally conscious books that portray the gay and lesbian experience from inside the community, Jenkins found that "with rare exceptions, it appears that this literature has yet to be written."[37]

By far, most of the books in our study reflected none of Chauncey's myths of isolation, invisibility, and homophobic internalization, suggesting that the portrayals of LGBTQ individuals are generally positive: the characters are well adjusted and have some sense of community with other LGBTQ individuals. There were a few exceptions, however. It is not surprising that the books set in earlier time periods (*The Imitation Game* or *Stuck Rubber Baby*) and/or those with adults who came of age in a less enlightened time (*Fun Home*) did reflect varying levels of isolation, invisibility, and internalization among the LGBTQ individuals. Books such as *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* and *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, however, also exhibit Chauncey's markers. Despite their present-day settings, the families of some characters in these graphic novels display oppressive tendencies similar to those in books set in earlier time periods. These are still representative of reality for many in the LGBTQ community, particularly transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals, but they seem to be less present in the literature on these lists. Whether this is because not as many of this type are being published or because it is simply represented less in awards and recognition lists is impossible to say based only on our study. These findings contrast with what Jenkins found in the books she examined. She noted that all three myths—of isolation, invisibility, and internalization—were prevalent in many of the books in her study. Moreover, gay and lesbian characters were rarely shown as resisting these myths by seeking a larger gay and lesbian community.[38]

Considering Jenkins's own framework of "common threads and recurring issues," we found that most of our books demonstrate authenticity in their depiction of LGBTQ individuals and experiences, and a number of them depict LGBTQ individuals and experiences as different—not better or worse, just different—from straight individuals and their experiences. Very few, however, portray any kind of relationship (friendship or student/teacher, for instance) between LGBTQ adults and children in traditional (i.e., straight) families. The most visible example of positive adult/child relationships in these books is found in the Wandering Son series. The two main characters, a trans girl and a trans boy, meet a trans man and a trans woman and develop a friendship that is free of the taint of perversion that similar relationships might have been given in earlier adolescent literature. In her study, Jenkins found that the books she examined overwhelmingly presented the perspective of the straight mainstream community rather than the gay and lesbian perspective from the "insider" point of view.[39] By the same token, so-called traditional families were almost always depicted in "a consistent oppositional relationship" with the gay and lesbian community.[40] And the vast majority of the gay and lesbian characters in the books were portrayed as "straight-acting" rather than "queer," essentially refusing to acknowledge or validate the existence of gay men and lesbians who do not act like their straight counterparts.[41]

Finally, we applied our own framework in examining the outcomes of the LGBTQ characters in the books in our study. Most of the books feature one (or more) characters who experience positive outcomes, although a fair number of the books depicted mixed outcomes. In contrast to Jenkins's findings about many of the adolescent books with LGBTQ themes that were

published in the 1970s and 1980s, the books we examined do not portray the LGBTQ experience as ultimately resulting in breakup, loss, ostracism, or death, though a few—notably *Blue Is the Warmest Color* and *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets*—do possess this tragic overtone.[42] Neither all rosy nor completely bleak, most of the books in our sample reflect a realistic view of the LGBTQ experience and, indeed, of the human condition in general.

Conclusion

Jenkins's frameworks, the ones she adapted as well as the one she developed, proved useful in analyzing graphic novels with LGBTQ content that have appeared on the Rainbow List. At the same time, the frameworks by themselves did not provide a complete picture of graphic novels' content. Our inclusion of bibliographic characteristics and additional demographic information helped fill in some of the gaps, but there is yet more that needs to be examined. Though we did identify the artistic style of the books, this study did not have the space to truly examine how the illustrated part of our graphic novels interacted with the story and representations of character. Future work desperately needs to be done looking more closely at how LGBTQ characters are drawn for various age groups and genres and how this affects the end result.

Admittedly, our study does have its limitations. We examined a purposive sample of graphic novels with LGBTQ content, focusing on works deigned by Rainbow List committees to be exemplary works for teens. The findings, therefore, are not generalizable beyond our sample. Future research could examine graphic novels with LGBTQ content other than those on the Rainbow List. It would be interesting to know whether the same basic characteristics would be evident in a larger sample of books. Other research could look more closely at the images in the books. We purposely took a holistic approach in examining the graphic novels in our sample, but no doubt additional insights might come from a close analysis of the images in a few representative titles. This is particularly true of graphic novels presenting transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals, as these representations in media in general tend to be most problematic.

In terms of practical use, the results of this study provide a somewhat more nuanced evaluation of LGBTQ graphic novels than the award lists do. It is not enough to simply have LGBTQ content on your shelves; there needs to be diversity among the LGBTQ characters and representation across race, gender identity, sexuality, ability, and ethnicity. Studies such as this provide discussion of these characteristics, perhaps allowing librarians to expand and diversify their collections.

Overall, it is gratifying to see rich, generally positive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals and experiences in graphic novels for teens. Here's hoping that future works will reflect more diversity in terms of race and ethnicity and gender and sexuality.

Appendix A: Graphic Novels

RL = Rainbow List

Bechdel, Alison. *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For.* Houghton Mifflin, 2008. RL.

———. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic.* Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Lambda Award. RL.

Cruse, Howard. *Stuck Rubber Baby.* DC Comics, 2010. RL.

Georges, Nicole. *Calling Dr. Laura: A Graphic Memoir.* Mariner Books, 2013. Lambda Award. RL.

Heinberg, Allan. *Avengers: The Children's Crusade.* Marvel, 2012. RL.

Hubert. *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets*. Illustrated by Marie Caillou, translated by David Homel. Arsenal Pulp, 2015. RL.

Maroh, Julie. *Blue Is the Warmest Color.* Arsenal Pulp, 2012. RL.

Merey, Ilike. *a + e 4ever.* Lethe Press, 2011. Stonewall Honor Book.

Miller, Saiya, and Liza Bley, eds. *Not Your Mother's Meatloaf: A Sex Education Comic Book.* Soft Skull Press, 2013. RL.

Monster, Sfé R., ed. *Beyond: The Queer Sci-Fi and Fantasy Comic Anthology*. Beyond Press, 2015. RL.

Nicholson, Hope, ed. *The Secret Loves of Geek Girls.* Expanded edition. Random House/Dark Horse Comics, 2016. RL.

O'Neill, Katie. *Princess Princess Ever After*. Oni Press, 2016. RL.

Ottaviani, Jim. *The Imitation Game: Alan Turing Decoded.* Illustrated by Leland Purvis. Abrams, 2016. RL.

Parent, Dan. *Kevin Keller.* Archie Comics, 2012. RL.

———. *Kevin Keller 2: Drive Me Crazy.* Archie Comics, 2013. RL.

Park, Judith. *YSquare Plus*. Yen Press/Hachette Group, 2008. RL.

Price, Liz. *Tomboy: A Graphic Memoir.* Zest Books, 2014. RL.

Rucka, Greg. *Gotham Central: Half a Life.* DC Comics, 2005. RL.

Rucka, Greg, and J. H. Williams III. *Batwoman: Elegy.* DC Comics, 2010. RL.

Schrag, Ariel. *Awkward and Definition.* Touchstone, 2008. RL.

Stevenson, Noelle, Shannon Watters, Carolyn Nowak, Maarta Laiho, and others. *Lumberjanes*, Vol. 3: *A Terrible Plan*. Simon & Schuster/Boom Studios, 2016. RL.

Takako, Shimura. *Wandering Son*. Vol. 1. Fantagraphic Books, 2011. RL.

———. *Wandering Son.* Vol. 2. Fantagraphic Books, 2012. RL.

———. *Wandering Son.* Vol. 3. Fantagraphic Books, 2012. RL.

———. *Wandering Son.* Vol. 4. Fantagraphic Books, 2013. RL.

Tamaki, Jillian. *SuperMutant Magic Academy***.** Drawn and Quarterly, 2015. RL.

Tamaki, Mariko, and Jillian Tamaki. *Skim.* Groundwood Books, 2008. RL.

Telgemeier, Raina. *Drama.* Graphix/Scholastic Inc., 2012. RL. Stonewall Honor Book. RL.

Thrash, Maggie. *Honor Girl***.** Candlewick, 2015. RL.

Williams, J. H., III, and W. Haden Blackman. *Batwoman*. Vol. 1: *Hydrology.* DC Comics, 2012. RL.

———. *Batwoman.* Vol. 3: *World's Finest.* DC Comics, 2013. RL.

Appendix B: Coding Frameworks

Title (author)
Genre
Part of a series?
Main character LGBTQ?
Other characters LGBTQ?
Time period(s) depicted
LGBTQ relationships depicted?
Outcomes of characters
Other minority groups depicted
Gerda: (0) invisible, (1) compensatory, (2) oppression, (3) women's cultural history, (4) women in history
Bishop: (1) social conscience, (2) melting pot, (3) culturally conscious
Chauncey: (1) isolation, (2) invisibility, (3) internalization
Jenkins: (1) questions of authenticity, (2)

relationship between gay/lesbian people and children in traditional families, (3) gay/lesbian people different?
Art style
Age of queer character(s)
Ethnicity of main/queer character(s)
Award(s)

Notes

1. Christine Jenkins, "From Queer to Gay and Back Again: Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–1997," *Library Quarterly* 68 (1998): 298–334.

2. We use the term "graphic novel" as an umbrella term to refer to book-length materials in graphic format. Strictly speaking, the term refers to graphic fiction, whereas other terms, such as "graphic memoir" or "graphic nonfiction," can be used to refer to informational books in graphic format.

3. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT), "Stonewall Book Awards: About," American Library Association, http://www.ala.org/glbtrt/award/stonewall (accessed July 22, 2017).

4. GLBTRT, "Rainbow Book List—GLBTQ Books for Children & Teens: About," American Library Association, http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/about (accessed July 22, 2017).

5. Lambda Literary, "About the Lammys," http://www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/ (accessed July 22, 2017).

6. Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2006).

7. Ibid., 165.

8. Talya Sokoll, "Representations of Trans* Youth in Young Adult Literature: A Report and a Suggestion," *Young Adult Library Services* 11 (Summer 2013): 23–26.

9. Kay Chick, "Fostering an Appreciation for All Kinds of Families: Picturebooks with Gay and Lesbian Themes," *Bookbird* 46 (2008): 15–22.

10. Jane Sunderland and Mark McGlashan, "The Linguistic, Visual and Multimodal Representation of Two-Mum and Two-Dad Families in Children's Picturebooks," *Language and Literature* 21 (2012): 189–210.

11. Cart and Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons*.

12. Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox, eds., *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017). See, for example, Eti Berland, "The Drama of Coming Out: Censorship and *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier," 205–17; Rachel Dean-Ruzicka, " 'What the Junk?': Defeating the Velociraptor in the Outhouse with the *Lumberjanes*," 218–32; Marni Stanley, "Unbalanced on the Brink: Adolescent Girls and the Discovery of the Self in *Skim* and *This One Summer*," 191–204.

13. Frederick Luis Aldama, ed., *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (Austin: University of Texas, 2010).

14. Michael A. Sheyahshe, *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008).

15. Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen, eds., *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

16. Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2015); Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II, eds., *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

17. Jenkins, "From Queer to Gay and Back Again," 306–11.

18. Ibid., 311–15.

19. Ibid., 315–19.

20. Ibid., 319–25.

21. Manga typically features cartoon-like drawings, characters with highly expressive features, and visual tropes to suggest various emotions; see, for example, Fiona, "Manga Tropes: Nosebleeds, Snot Bubbles, and More," *Tofugu*, March 7, 2013, https://www.tofugu.com/japan/manga-tropes/ (accessed July 22, 2017).

22. Christine Baldacchino, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, illus. Isabelle Malenfant (Toronto: Groundwood, 2014); Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, *I Am Jazz*, illus. Shelagh McNicholas (New York: Dial, 2014).

23. Ritch C. Savin-Williams and Lisa M. Diamond, "Sexual Identity Trajectories among Sexual-Minority Youths: Gender Comparisons," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 29 (2000): 607–27.

24. Jenkins, "From Queer to Gay and Back Again," 306–11.

25. Ibid., 311–15.

26. Rudine Sims Bishop, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982), 33.

27. Jenkins, "From Queer to Gay and Back Again," 315–16.

28. Ibid., 319.

29. Ibid., 299.

30. Nancy Garden, *Annie on My Mind* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982).

31. Cart and Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, 17–18.

32. Jim Milliot, "Adult Nonfiction Stayed Hot in 2016," *Publisher's Weekly*, January 13, 2017, https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/72501-adult-nonfiction-stayed-hot-in-2016.html (accessed July 23, 2017).

33. Jenkins, "From Queer to Gay and Back Again," 302.

34. Ibid., 301–2.

35. Ibid., 307–11.

36. Ibid., 313.

37. Ibid., 315.

38. Ibid., 316–19.

39. Ibid., 320.

40. Ibid., 321.

41. Ibid., 324.

42. Ibid., 309.