



Happiness at the End of the Rainbow: Exploring Happy Endings in Young Adult Literature with Queer Female Protagonists, 2009–2017

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Abstract

Early LGBTQ+ young adult literature painted a negative and depressing view of what it means to be queer, typically featuring isolated and socially rejected stereotypical LGBTQ+ characters, homophobia as a key plot element, and sad endings for the LGBTQ+ characters. This problematic representation has shifted over the years to be more inclusive, more diverse, and more positive. A sample of twenty-two English-language LGBTQ+ young adult novels written between 2009 and 2017 with happy endings and female protagonists was analyzed to determine the diversity of happy endings and characters now present in the genre. While there is still more progress to be made, particularly in the intersectionality of identities, our study finds that there is a clear direction away from the problematic past of this literary tradition with more diversity of representation and a range of positive outcomes for the protagonists.

Introduction

Diversity in young adult literature has significantly increased in the last two decades, with increased representation of characters of various backgrounds, races, religions, and gender identities.¹ This development is particularly obvious in young adult LGBTQ+ literature, which has evolved dramatically since the first gay-themed young adult novels were published in the 1970s. Not only are there now more books on the market with LGBTQ+ protagonists; there are also now more novels with queer female protagonists, with varying sexual orientations and

gender identities. In addition, the number of these books that feature happy endings also appears to be on the rise, conveying the clear message that a queer life can also be a happy and successful life. In this study, a sample of English-language books published between 2009 and 2017 with female protagonists and happy endings was analyzed to identify and define the various types of happy ending present in these novels and the characteristics of the protagonist herself. This analysis highlights the contrast between past LGBTQ+ young adult literature and more contemporary novels.

Defining Terms

The vocabulary concerning LGBTQ+ people is constantly shifting. No word has suffered as much confusion as “queer,” generally considered to be the Q in LGBTQ+. This term was once a homophobic slur, but the community has begun to reclaim it in recent years, working to use it as an umbrella term for any identities that are not straight. While we acknowledge the word’s checkered history, we will use the phrase “queer identity” to describe any gender identity or sexual orientation experienced by the protagonists in this sample; though when we are discussing one protagonist in particular, we will use their particular queer identity.

The queer terms discussed in this paper are defined as follows:

Lesbian: a female who is attracted to other women.

Bisexual: a person who is attracted to two or more genders.

Transgender: a person whose gender identity does not match their sex; e.g., a girl who was born with a boy’s body. A transgender person can be MtF (male to female) or FtM (female to male)

Asexual: a person who does not experience sexual attraction to anyone, regardless of gender.

Genderqueer: a person whose gender identity does not conform to the societal norms for that gender, or whose gender identity may be fluid.

Cisgender: a person whose gender identity matches their sex at birth.

Research Questions

This research sought to address the following research questions:

1. Have at least twenty English-language LGBTQ+ young adult novels with happy endings featuring female protagonists been published between 2009 and 2017?

2. Based on a content analysis of the novels identified in (1), is it possible to develop a simple typology of happy endings in recent LGBTQ+ young adult novels featuring queer female protagonists?
3. What are the characteristics of the protagonists of the novels identified in (1)?

Literature Review

The history of LGBTQ+ young adult fiction is a short and generally a sad one. The first LGBTQ+ young adult novel is generally acknowledged to be *I'll Get There. It'd Better Be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan, published in 1969.ⁱⁱ This novel is typical of LGBTQ+ YA novels written during the period of the 1970s to the 1990s; these novels can be characterized by four consistent features. First, there was a lack of diversity of representation of the LGBTQ+ characters themselves, and they were generally depicted as stereotypes. Second, there was a lack of LGBTQ+ characters in the novels, and the LGBTQ+ character was rarely the protagonist. Third, the vast majority of the novels had homophobia as a major theme or plot device.ⁱⁱⁱ Fourth, the LGBTQ+ characters were often alone, rejected by heterosexual peers,^{iv} and isolated from the LGBTQ+ community. In most young adult novels of this period, LGBTQ+ characters usually suffered and often died, and these novels generally made it clear that a queer life was not a happy or successful life.^v

This pattern was certainly reflective of societal attitudes toward homosexuality in general at that time, and as social attitudes began to change, so did literary representations. Between 2000 and 2004, sixty-two books were published that can be identified as “queer YA.”^{vi} The majority of these books featured LGBTQ+ protagonists, and these characters were not simply gay or lesbian— more “diverse queer and trans identities”^{vii} began to be represented in YA fiction. The genre has continued to expand, with protagonists of various queer identities and plots of every imaginable type. However, LGBTQ+ YA literature struggled to break away from its past reliance on homophobia as a theme, and novels often ended up “othering” the LGBTQ+ community, despite attempts to normalize queer identities.^{viii} It was also still rare until recently to have more than two queer characters in a novel; one notable exception from that time period is *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan (2003), which showcased a variety of developed LGBTQ+ characters.^{ix}

Representation of LGBTQ+ identities in young adult literature is very important, as Epstein points out:

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).^x

Both of these kinds of reading experiences should be available in LGBTQ+ YA literature. Young adults who are LGBTQ+ can find themselves in the pages, while non-LGBTQ+ young adults may be exposed to the other sexual and gender identities, and their understanding may be broadened as a result. This would be particularly important for questioning young adults, who may start out reading “window books” but then actually find themselves looking in a mirror. This type of reading experience would help them to shape their own identities and to develop their own concepts about identities in the world at large.

However, there are challenges to representation in LGBTQ+ young adult literature. First, the queer characters in these novels are still by and large either gay or lesbian, though that has begun to change.^{xi} Other types of representation are also missing, as Jiménez notes: “While these books feature sexual diversity, other kinds of diversity (in terms of race, religion, ability, class) tend to be ignored.”^{xii} This lack of intersectionality is a major problem because it reduces the LGBTQ+ experience to that of white, able-bodied, middle-class queer teens.^{xiii} Ignoring intersectional diversity within the LGBTQ+ community itself may be just as isolating as ignoring LGBTQ+ people in general in literature.

Finally, the vast majority of LGBTQ+ young adult literature is written about male characters. According to Malinda Lo (one of the authors featured in the sample), only 25% of LGBTQ+ literature focuses on queer female protagonists, while 4% focuses on those with fluid gender identities and/or trans characters.^{xiv} This huge gender disparity is a problem that should be addressed—if these numbers hold true, that means that the majority of LGBTQ+ young adult literature focuses on cisgender gay males. While the needs of this community are obvious, queer females need “mirror books” too, especially since traditionally female sexuality has been “problematic” in young adult literature, often minimized or described using euphemisms.^{xv}

Methods

We set out to identify a minimum of twenty books that satisfied our four criteria, on the assumption that twenty books would provide sufficient substance and variety for a meaningful analysis. To be included in our sample, books had to (1) be published in English, (2) have a queer female protagonist, (3) have a happy ending, and (4) have a publication date of 2009–2017. We began our search using the lists of titles compiled by Malinda Lo, who has been tracking the number of young adult books with LGBTQ+ characters since 2011 on her blog.^{xvi} We added to this list by searching the public library catalog using the search terms “young adult literature” and (“lesbian literature,” “bisexual literature,” “asexual literature,” etc.) within the date ranges 2009–2017. Reviews on Goodreads were consulted to determine if the titles identified had positive endings before they were added to the sample.

We did not attempt to create an exhaustive list of every book published within the date range satisfying these criteria. Our goal was to compile a sufficiently substantial sample that could be read and analyzed within a six-month period; we aimed to identify a minimum of twenty titles for analysis, and we were successful in meeting (and slightly exceeding) this target. Our process yielded the twenty-two titles, all available at our local public library, that were included in this study. These titles are summarized in table 1. A content analysis of each of these twenty-two titles was conducted to identify the type of happy ending and the features of the protagonists. (Appendix A provides full publication information for each of the novels included in the sample.)

Table 1. The Novels in the Sample

Title	Author	Year	Protagonist(s)	LGBTQ+ Identity
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Ash	Lesbian
<i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i>	S. J. Adams	2011	Debbie	Lesbian
<i>Huntress</i>	Malinda Lo	2011	Kaede; Taisin	Lesbian; lesbian
<i>Being Emily</i>	Rachel Gold	2012	Emily	Trans (MtF)
<i>It's Our Prom (So Deal with It)</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2012	Azure; Luke	Lesbian; gay
<i>Everything Leads to You</i>	Nina LaCour	2014	Emi	Lesbian
<i>Lies My Girlfriend Told Me</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2014	Alix	Lesbian
<i>Femme</i>	Mette Bach	2015	Sofie	Lesbian

<i>Read Me Like a Book</i>	Liz Kessler	2015	Ashleigh	Lesbian
<i>Not Otherwise Specified</i>	Hannah Moskowitz	2015	Etta	Bisexual
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna	Lesbian
<i>Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity</i>	Kristin Elizabeth Clark	2016	Jess	Trans (MtF)
<i>Of Fire and Stars</i>	Audrey Coulthurst	2016	Dennaleia; Amaranthine	Lesbian; bisexual
<i>Girl Mans Up</i>	M-E Girard	2016	Pen	Genderqueer + lesbian
<i>You Know Me Well</i>	Nina LaCour and David Levithan	2016	Kate; Mark	Lesbian; gay
<i>Every Heart a Doorway</i>	Seanán McGuire	2016	Nancy	Asexual
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	Amanda	Trans (MtF)
<i>Finding Your Feet</i>	Cass Lennox	2017	Evie; Ty	Female asexual; trans (FtM)
<i>Rough Patch</i>	Nicole Markotić	2017	Keira	Bisexual
<i>Tash Hearts Tolstoy</i>	Kathryn Ormsbee	2017	Tash	Female asexual
<i>It's Not Like It's a Secret</i>	Misa Sugiura	2017	Sana	Lesbian
<i>Our Own Private Universe</i>	Robin Talley	2017	Aki	Bisexual

Defining and Classifying Happy Endings

We chose to highlight happy endings in LGBTQ+ young adult literature with female protagonists for three main reasons. The first is simple: new stories are needed to combat the trends from earlier decades in which queer characters were rarely shown having positive life experiences. The world is changing for people who are LGBTQ+, and young adult literature should reflect that social change. The second reason is that nearly every genre of stories has a mix of happy and sad endings, and LGBTQ+ young adult literature needs to offer that variety too. The third reason relates to the feelings of the audience. The girls who are described on the pages of these novels reflect real-life girls across these orientation and gender spectrums who are at a vulnerable age for self-esteem and for their feelings about their futures. Seeing that their identities are not only reflected in literature, but that they are also granted happy endings, can give them hope for their own futures.

One of the challenges we faced in this project was defining what constitutes a “happy ending” as there is no standard, widely accepted definition. We developed our own definition of a happy ending as one in which the protagonist is successful at the conclusion of the novel in that

she has achieved an important goal, but this success may not always appear as obvious or explicit “happiness.” Close reading of the selected novels led us to the identification of four distinct types of happy endings: the *romantic* happy ending, the *quest* happy ending, the *freedom* happy ending, and the *discovery* happy ending. All but one of the novels analyzed fit at least two of these categories. Each of these types is described in more detail below.

Type 1: Romantic

The romantic is the simplest kind of happy ending: at the end of the novel, the heroine is with the partner of her choice (whether or not this is the person she was originally interested in) and is happy in that relationship. This kind of happy ending is the most common type in the novels analyzed and occurs not only in books where romance drives the plot, but also in books in which the focus is not primarily romantic. Regardless of the genesis of the relationship, the story ends with the suggestion of a positive future for the heroine and her love interest.

Type 2: Quest

In this type of happy ending, the heroine has a quest from the beginning of the novel. The quest could be something as simple as creating the perfect prom, such as Azure in Peters’ *It’s Our Prom (So Deal with It)*, or as ambitious as rescuing a kingdom (e.g., Kaede in Lo’s *Huntress*). The heroine may not complete the goal in the way she expected, and the quest may be an ongoing struggle, but the story ends with a sense of fulfillment.

Type 3: Freedom

Novels with this type of happy ending are generally darker than the other types, and the happiness of the book overall is often questionable. Typically, the heroine is introduced in uncomfortable circumstances—the victim of homophobia, for example, or in an abusive or uncaring household (such as Ash in *Ash*, Pen in *Girl Mans Up*, Keira in *Rough Patch*, and Sofie in *Femme*). They live in a daily struggle, and their self-esteem suffers. However, the book ends with an escape from the situation, and while this escape may be bittersweet, the protagonist’s future looks brighter and freer.

Type 4: Discovery

This type of happy ending is the most ambiguous of the four. While finding out the truth is its own kind of freedom (see above), it may not be a cheerful truth. If the truth is about the protagonist's sexual orientation and/or gender identity, this discovery may result in new problems to overcome. If the truth is about the protagonist's family, the satisfaction of discovery may be muted by the truth's repercussions. However, by the book's end, it is clear that the heroine is happier because of the discovery, and her future, while shaped by the past, remains hopeful.

Findings

Types of Happy Endings

Using the typology of four distinct types of happy endings identified earlier (Type 1: Romantic; Type 2: Quest; Type 3: Freedom; Type 4: Discovery), a content analysis of the twenty-two novels was completed and each novel was classified according to the type of happy ending it exemplified. As tables 2–5 make clear, all but one of the novels (*Rough Patch*) has more than one type of happy ending.

Books with romantic happy endings, in which the protagonist succeeds in establishing a romantic relationship, were the most prevalent. Seventeen out of the twenty-two titles had this type of ending.

Table 2. Books with Romantic Happy Endings (Type 1)

Title	Author	Year	Happy Ending Description
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Because she breaks her mother's curse, Ash is free to be with Kaisa.
<i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i>	S. J. Adams	2011	Debbie doesn't end up with Lisa, but she does have a date with Moira, and she is happier at the prospect of that relationship.
<i>It's Our Prom (So Deal with It)</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2012	Azure gets back with her girlfriend Desi, and Luke starts dating Ryan.
<i>Everything Leads to You</i>	Nina LaCour	2014	Emi and Ava get together once the movie is finished.
<i>Lies My Girlfriend Told Me</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2014	Alix and Lianna move past the lies in their relationship and agree to give it another

			try, confessing their love for each other.
<i>Femme</i>	Mette Bach	2015	Sofie and Clea are publicly a couple and plan to go away together to college.
<i>Read Me Like a Book</i>	Liz Kessler	2015	Ashleigh begins a relationship with Taylor.
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna and Mary decide to stay together, and they're out and proud.
<i>Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity</i>	Kristin Elizabeth Clark	2016	Jess and Chunk (Chuck) confess their feelings.
<i>Of Fire and Stars</i>	Audrey Coulthurst	2016	Denna and Mare go away together, looking to find out more about magic.
<i>Girl Mans Up</i>	M. E. Girard	2016	Pen and Blake end up together and happy.
<i>You Know Me Well</i>	Nina LaCour and David Levithan	2016	Kate and Violet are together, and Mark finds a boy he's interested in too.
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	This one is ambiguous: Grant isn't sure he wants to continue their relationship when he discovers that Amanda is trans, but he wants to learn more, and the book ends on a conversation in Grant's car.
<i>Finding Your Feet</i>	Cass Lennox	2017	Evie and Ty are together, and they continue their relationship when Evie returns to Toronto.
<i>Tash Hearts Tolstoy</i>	Kathryn Ormsbee	2017	Tash and Paul get together after realizing that they've both had crushes on each other for a while.
<i>It's Not Like It's a Secret</i>	Misa Sugiura	2017	Jaime forgives Sana for cheating, and they remain together.
<i>Our Own Private Universe</i>	Robin Talley	2017	Aki and Christa decide that their "summer fling" is going to continue, though Christa will have to be closeted.

Five books in the sample did not have romantic happy endings, and they fall into two categories.

Romantic Failures: Huntress, Being Emily, and Rough Patch all end with couples breaking up. The breakup in *Huntress* results from Taisin becoming a sage and needing to be celibate; *Being Emily* has a time skip of two years, during which Emily and Claire have broken up because of distance; and the breakup in *Rough Patch* results from the girlfriend's brother stabbing Keira when he discovers their relationship.

No Romantic Plot: Neither Every Heart a Doorway nor Not Otherwise Specified have strong romantic plots. In *Every Heart a Doorway*, Nancy's goal is to return to the land of the

Dead, which she accomplishes at the end of the book. In *Not Otherwise Specified*, Etta deals with a crush on a boy and long-held feelings for her friend Rachel, but once again her goal is to find herself and get to Brentwood with her new friends, and she accomplishes these goals and sorts out her feelings without embarking on a romantic relationship.

Fourteen of the novels in the sample concluded with the successful completion of a quest, as table 3 summarizes.

Table 3. Books with Quest Happy Endings (Type 2)

Title	Author	Year	Happy Ending
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Ash is able to free Sidhean from her mother's curse, which allows her to pay her debt.
<i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i>	S. J. Adams	2011	Debbie confesses her feelings to Lisa (unreciprocated), but she fulfills her holy quest, as well the other to-do quests on the Church of Blue list.
<i>Huntress</i>	Malinda Lo	2011	Kaede and Taisin defeat Elowen, the Fairy Queen's daughter. Kaede becomes the King's Huntsman, and Taisin becomes a Sage.
<i>Being Emily</i>	Rachel Gold	2012	Emily is able to transition, and she is beginning the process of surgery as she attends college as a girl.
<i>Everything Leads to You</i>	Nina LaCour	2014	Emi and Ava finish the movie and discover Ava's past.
<i>It's Our Prom (So Deal with It)</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2014	Azure and Luke manage to pull off a great alternative prom, and Luke's play goes off without a hitch.
<i>Not Otherwise Specified</i>	Hannah Moskowitz	2015	Etta passes the audition and goes to Brentwood.
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna gets to have her radio show for her dad's church, and she runs it on her own terms.
<i>Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity</i>	Kristin Elizabeth Clark	2016	Jess makes it to her father's wedding, and she attends as a girl.
<i>You Know Me Well</i>	Nina LaCour and David Levithan	2016	Kate is able to have her art show, and her parents agree to let her defer college for a year.
<i>Every Heart a Doorway</i>	Seanan McGuire	2016	Nancy and her friends solve the

			murders, and she finds the door back to the land of the Dead.
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	Amanda manages to pass, and even when that comes apart, she is still able to go to school in her dad's town without too much fear (after the Parker incident).
<i>Tash Hearts Tolstoy</i>	Kathryn Ormsbee	2017	Tash doesn't win a Golden Tuba, but <i>Unhappy Families</i> is finished, and she begins another project.
<i>Our Own Private Universe</i>	Robin Talley	2017	Aki and Jake's debates go well, and they decide to work on being youth delegates for their church.

Twelve titles can be classified as having Type 3: Freedom happy endings, in which the protagonist escapes from a bad situation and faces a brighter and more hopeful future.

Table 4. Books with Freedom Happy Endings (Type 3)

Title	Author	Year	Happy Ending Description
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Ash is able to leave her stepmother's home and be with Kaisa.
<i>Huntress</i>	Malinda Lo	2011	Kaede is able to leave the academy and pursue the job of Huntsman.
<i>Being Emily</i>	Rachel Gold	2012	Emily is able to get out of her home, and eventually her family accepts her.
<i>Femme</i>	Mette Bach	2015	Sofie and Clea are going away to college, escaping their small town.
<i>Not Otherwise Specified</i>	Hannah Moskowitz	2015	Etta is able to get out of Nebraska and away from her former biphobic friends.
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna is able to come out in her new town at last, and she deals with the consequences.
<i>Of Fire and Stars</i>	Audrey Coulthurst	2016	Denna and Mare both escape their royal lives (Denna by faking her own death).
<i>Girl Mans Up</i>	M. E. Girard	2016	Pen goes to live with her brother, keeping a relationship with her parents but getting away from their expectations.
<i>Every Heart a Doorway</i>	Seanán McGuire	2016	Nancy is able to return to the land of the Dead, where she felt at home.
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	Parker attacks Amanda when she's

			outed by Bee, but eventually she is able to live as someone openly trans.
<i>Finding Your Feet</i>	Cass Lennox	2017	Evie sorts out her uncomfortable relationship with her mother and moves to Toronto, while Ty is finally able to move on from Lucette.
<i>Rough Patch</i>	Nicole Markotić	2017	Keira's family grows closer, with the exception of her biphobic father, who leaves.

Sixteen titles ended with discovery, the fourth type of happy ending identified, in which the protagonist either makes a self-discovery or learns a truth that has a major impact on her life.

Table 5. Books with Discovery Happy Endings (Type 4)

Title	Author	Year	Happy Ending Description
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Ash finds out about her mother's relationship with the Fairies, and she is able to find the solution to the curse.
<i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i>	S. J. Adams	2011	Debbie discovers her spirituality in the Church of Blue.
<i>Huntress</i>	Malinda Lo	2011	Taisin discovers the extent of her powers, and Kaede discovers the Fairy kingdom and finds that she wants to be the King's Huntsman.
<i>Everything Leads to You</i>	Nina LaCour	2014	Emi and Ava solve the mystery of Ava's family history.
<i>Lies My Girlfriend Told Me</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2014	Alix discovers Swanee's lies, and she finds a way to connect with her baby brother.
<i>Femme</i>	Mette Bach	2015	Sofie discovers that she's gay and finds a way to have a relationship with Clea.
<i>Read Me Like a Book</i>	Liz Kessler	2015	Ashleigh discovers that she's gay and has a crush on her English teacher (which her English teacher does not return).
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna finds out more about her family and figures out how her faith works in her father's church.

<i>Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity</i>	Kristin Elizabeth Clark	2016	Jess realizes that she's been treating Chuck badly as a friend, and she resolves to be better.
<i>Of Fire and Stars</i>	Audrey Coulthurst	2016	Denna discovers how powerful her magic is, and she and Amaranthine solve Casmiel's murder.
<i>You Know Me Well</i>	Nina LaCour and David Levithan	2016	Kate and Luke both manage to sort out their relationships with their best friends and find new, important relationships.
<i>Every Heart a Doorway</i>	Seanan McGuire	2016	Nancy and her friends discover the truth about the murders.
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	Amanda builds a relationship with her father and sorts out the past and the present.
<i>Tash Hearts Tolstoy</i>	Kathryn Ormsbee	2017	Tash finds out a lot about fame and how she wants to respond to it.
<i>It's Not Like It's a Secret</i>	Misa Sugiura	2017	Sana discovers the truth about her father's affair: he is having an affair because of his arranged marriage, and Sana's mother is allowing it to let him be happy.
<i>Our Own Private Universe</i>	Robin Talley	2017	Aki finds more meaning in her faith and her father's church.

Of all the novels analyzed in this study, *Rough Patch* by Nicole Markotić has the most ambiguous happy ending. Its heroine, Keira, suffers deeply for being bisexual. Her first relationship with a girl, Jayne, ends with Jayne's brother stabbing her, injuring her so badly she may never be able to figure skate again. Her father has left the family because he is unable to deal with her bisexuality. It could be argued that this book does not have a happy ending. However, Markotić frames this ending in a positive light. Keira is now out, and her unsupportive father is out of her life, which is better than having him in her life to abuse her. The rest of her family is supportive, and Keira is ready to move forward in her life, even though there is uncertainty about what her future will hold.

The book's title provides a clue to the reason this ending can still be called happy: this episode is certainly a *rough patch* in Keira's life, and she experiences terrible pain for her identity. However, there is a sense that Keira is strong enough to move forward with the help of

her family and friends. This is an episode in Keira’s life, and it’s clear that Markotić believes that the rest of her life will be happier despite experiencing it.

The Protagonists

As table 1 indicates, the protagonists in these novels are varied both in sexual orientations and in gender identities. Table 6 analyzes the different LGBTQ+ identities represented.

Table 6. LGBTQ+ Identity by Number of Books

Lesbian	13
Bisexual	4
Asexual	3
Transgender	3
Genderqueer	1

Clearly, lesbians are still by far the most common queer representation in LGBTQ+ YA novels with female protagonists; however, other LGBTQ+ identities are being represented in increasing numbers. This is particularly impressive for asexual characters, since human asexuality was only officially recognized in 2004.^{xvii} Three books in our sample of books published since 2009 feature asexual female leads and end happily, which is promising indeed. It is also interesting to note that in our eight-year publishing window of 2009–2017, representation becomes increasingly varied with the passage of time. Table 7 shows the distribution of LGBTQ+ identities by publication year.

Table 7. LGBTQ+ Identities by Year

Year	Number of Books in Sample	LGBTQ+ Identities
2009	1	1 lesbian
2011	2	2 lesbians
2012	2	1 lesbian, 1 transgender
2014	2	2 lesbians
2015	3	1 bisexual, 2 lesbians
2016	7	4 lesbians, 1 genderqueer, 2 transgender, 1 asexual

2017	5	2 asexual, 2 bisexual, 1 lesbian
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From 2015 onward, there is a noticeable increase in the variety of LGBTQ+ identities, with 2016 being the most diverse year. It is also important to note that our analysis began in June 2017, so any books published after this date were not included in the data set. Thus the 2017 figures only include books published in the first half of the year.

Discussion

This sample of books clearly demonstrates that there is a shift in LGBTQ+ young adult literature from the past, particularly from the 1969–1982 period as analyzed by Cuseo,^{xviii} but even from the early 2000s, as described by Epstein.^{xix} In previous decades, there were four major problems in LGBTQ+ young adult literature: a lack of diversity in representation, a lack of LGBTQ+ characters, homophobia as a plot device, and a severe lack of happy endings. The sample analyzed in this study exhibits significant positive development in each of these areas.

Problem 1: Diversity of Representation

The books analyzed in this sample all have female protagonists, so the LGBTQ+ identities are naturally limited to those possible for girls. It is true that the majority of these characters are lesbians, but in the 2015–2017 period, there was more variety, with representation of asexual, bisexual, and transgender characters. There were also some books, primarily fantasy titles, in which labels were not used (*Ash*, *Huntress*, and *Of Fire and Stars*), although the characters' LGBTQ+ identities are clear and unambiguous.

There is not a huge amount of racial diversity among the characters in this sample, and most of the characters identify as white, although three protagonists are never explicitly identified by racial identity. Table 8 depicts the racial diversity of protagonists.

Table 8. Race of Protagonists

Race	Number of protagonists
White	15
Mixed	1
Black	2
Asian	1
Ambiguous	3

Most of the characters come from a non-specific background, generally middle class and “typical” for their surroundings (American, Canadian, British). However, there are two exceptions in which the protagonists come from cultural minority groups. Pen in *Girl Mans Up* comes from a traditional Portuguese family, and Sana in *It’s Not Like It’s a Secret* comes from a traditional Japanese family. Both girls experience life through the lenses of their families’ expectations, and they experience their LGBTQ+ identities through that lens as well. This leads to conflict within the family, and it takes a lot of compromise and understanding of those traditions in order for Pen and Sana to find their own paths. For Pen, this path leads her away from her parents’ home, whereas Sana develops an increased understanding of her heritage and her parents develop an understanding of their daughter’s reality.

Problem 2: Number of LGBTQ+ Characters

Each book in this sample has at least two LGBTQ+ characters, generally the protagonist and their love interest. However, the majority of the novels have more than two queer characters, and a few books have a wide cast of LGBTQ+ characters of varying ages, such as *If I Was Your Girl*, which features Amanda’s trans support group. The books with the greatest number of LGBTQ+ characters are *You Know Me Well* and *Finding Your Feet*, both of which feature an almost entirely LGBTQ+ cast, with the parents being the only straight characters. As both of these books take place during Pride Week (in San Francisco and Toronto, respectively), the novels are able to depict an entire community of LGBTQ+ people of different ages and identities celebrating each other.

Having a broader cast of LGBTQ+ characters besides the protagonist is positive for two reasons. The first is the development of a sense of community that helps to eliminate the isolation prevalent in LGBTQ+ young adult fiction from earlier years. The more LGBTQ+ characters present, the greater sense of community and positive identity. When the protagonist is not alone in their identity, they have a greater sense of place and connection, and a support network of people when they may be facing resistance at home or school. The second reason is that the presence of more LGBTQ+ characters gives the protagonist (and through them, the reader) an understanding of the variety of LGBTQ+ identities and shows them that there are many ways to be LGBTQ+ and still find a community.

Problem 3: Homophobia

The majority of these novels take place in contemporary real-world settings, and unfortunately homophobia remains an issue. Even the stories that take place in a fantasy world (*Ash, Huntress, Of Fire and Stars*) contain hints of homophobia. Two books in particular, *Femme* and *Rough Patch*, take place in communities where homophobia is a real threat. Others exist in more neutral environments, with some homophobic characters in the protagonists' lives, and still others mention homophobia as a real problem even though the characters do not directly encounter it in any meaningful way.

However, homophobia is rarely the “plot device” that it was in the past. Characters might be concerned about coming out, but their stories focus on their own identity crises or other goals, and homophobia is not a central theme. Some novels explore the consequences of actions by homophobic characters, such as when the fathers of both Keira (*Rough Patch*) and Ashleigh (*Read Me Like a Book*) fail to cope with their daughters' identities, but the homophobic characters are always clearly depicted as being in the wrong, and the protagonists have a supportive network to help them through the experience.

It must be noted, however, that some of the characters experience hatred targeted specifically at them because of their identity. Etta in *Not Otherwise Specified* is ostracized from her lesbian friend group for being bisexual; Nancy (*Every Heart a Doorway*), Evie (*Finding Your Feet*), and Tash (*Tash Hearts Tolstoy*) experience backlash about their asexuality; and transphobia is accepted as a matter of course for Jess (*Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity*), Amanda (*If I Was Your Girl*) and Emily (*Being Emily*). These depictions illustrate that prejudice exists in unexpected places, sometimes even within the LGBTQ+ community itself. This is an important issue for young LGBTQ+ teens of any identity, and the fact that this is depicted in these books actually subverts the “homophobia as plot” trope by identifying the fact that people can fear and hate any identity that contradicts their expectations.

Problem 4: Happy Endings

From the tables above, it's clear that every book in this sample has at least one kind of happy ending. In fact, with the exception of *Rough Patch*, they all have at least two different kinds of happy endings. This finding suggests that the stories are not only giving readers positive plot outcomes, but they're also giving them positive resolution of the different storylines as well,

showing that romance is not the only kind of narrative for LGBTQ+ girls. Furthermore, the trend of increasing numbers of LGBTQ+ young adult novels being published no doubt reflects the trend in many parts of the world toward acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities and shows that the days of the “unhappy queer teen” may become a thing of the past.

Conclusion

The twenty-two books in this sample show a clear, positive movement away from the LGBTQ+ young adult literature of the past. Whereas such novels were once heavily focused upon homophobic, stereotypical narratives featuring one-dimensional male characters and usually ending in tragedy, the sample shows that new stories are being told. Contemporary LGBTQ+ young adult literature includes heroines across the spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity, with stories that contain multiple happy endings, a cast of LGBTQ+ characters, and depth of character development that make these stories sing. There is still progress to be made in the intersectionality of identities; representation is not truly diverse until all facets of identity may be found within a category. However, the remarkable amount of change even within the years of the sample show that there is hope that change will continue. For LGBTQ+ young women, it is to be hoped that fictional happy endings are just the beginning.

Appendix A: Chronological List of Young Adult Novels Analyzed

Lo, Malinda. 2009. *Ash*. New York: Hachette.

Adams, S. J. 2011. *Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie*. Woodbury, MN: Flux.

Lo, Malinda. 2011. *Huntress*. New York: Hachette.

Gold, Rachel. 2012. *Being Emily*. Tallahassee: Bella Books.

Peters, Julie Anne. 2012. *It's Our Prom (So Deal with It)*. New York: Hachette.

LaCour, Nina. 2014. *Everything Leads to You*. New York: Dutton Books.

Peters, Julie Anne. 2014. *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me*. New York: Little, Brown.

Bach, Mette. 2015. *Femme*. Toronto: James Lorimer.

Kessler, Liz. 2015. *Read Me Like a Book*. London: Indigo.

Moskowitz, Hannah. 2015. *Not Otherwise Specified*. New York: Simon Pulse.

Brown, Jaye Robin. 2016. *Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit*. New York: HarperTeen.

- Clark, Kristin Elizabeth. 2016. *Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Coulthurst, Audrey. 2016. *Of Fire and Stars*. New York, Balzer + Bray (HarperCollins).
- Girard, M-G. 2016. *Girl Mans Up*. New York: HarperCollins.
- LaCour, Nina, and David Levithan. 2016. *You Know Me Well*. New York: St. Martin's.
- McGuire, Seanan. 2016. *Every Heart a Doorway*. New York: Tor.
- Russo, Meredith. 2016. *If I Was Your Girl*. New York: Flatiron Books.
- Lennox, Cass. 2017. *Finding Your Feet*. Burnside, NC: Riptide Publishing.
- Markotić, Nicole. 2017. *Rough Patch*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Ormsbee, Kathryn. 2017. *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*. New York: Simon & Schuster BFYR.
- Sugiura, Misa. 2017. *It's Not Like It's a Secret*. New York: Harper Teen.
- Talley, Robin. 2017. *Our Own Private Universe*. New York: Harlequin Teen.

Notes

ⁱ Shelley Diaz, "Embracing Diversity in YA Lit," *School Library Journal*, September 12, 2013, <http://www.slj.com/2013/09/teens-ya/embracing-diversity-in-ya-lit/#>; Malinda Lo, "LGBTQ YA by the Numbers," *Malinda Lo* (blog), October 12, 2017, <https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2017/10/12/lgbtq-ya-by-the-numbers-2015-16>.

ⁱⁱ Allan A. Cuseo, *Homosexual Characters in YA Novels: A Literary Analysis, 1969–1982* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992); John Goldsmith, "The Evolution of Queer Representation in the Young Adult Genre" (Honors thesis, Western Oregon University, 2016), http://digitalcommons.wou.edu/honors_theses/96.

ⁱⁱⁱ B. J. Epstein, "We're Here, We're (Not?) Queer: GLBTQ Characters in Children's Books," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012): 287–300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2012.677241>.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 292.

^v Goldsmith, "The Evolution of Queer Representation"; B. J. Epstein, *Are The Kids All Right?* (London: HammerOn Press, 2013).

^{vi} Goldsmith, "The Evolution of Queer Representation."

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 11.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x Epstein, "We're Here, We're (Not) Queer," 287.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Laura M. Jiménez, “Representations in Award-Winning LGBTQ Young Adult Literature from 2000–2013,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19, no. 4 (2015): 414.

^{xiii} Epstein, “We’re Here, We’re (Not) Queer.”

^{xiv} Jiménez, “Representations in Award-Winning LGBTQ Young Adult Literature”; Lo, “LGBTQ YA by the Numbers.”

^{xv} Epstein, “We’re Here, We’re (Not) Queer.”

^{xvi} Lo, “LGBTQ YA by the Numbers.”

^{xvii} Lori Anne Brotto, Morag A. Yule, and Boris B. Gorzalka, “Asexuality: An Extreme Variant of Sexual Desire Disorder?” *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 12 no. 3 (2015): 646–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsm.12806>.

^{xviii} Cuseo, *Homosexual Characters in YA Novels*.

^{xix} Epstein, “We’re Here, We’re (Not) Queer.”