The Magical Portrayal of Queer Characters in YA and Children's Fantasy Literature

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Portraying Queer characters in literature for youth can be a double-edged sword. Recently, the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in both Young Adult (YA) and children's literature has become an increasingly prominent aspect of contemporary storytelling, through diverse and inclusive narratives that represent the experiences of young Queer individuals. However, depending on how Queer characters are represented in YA and children's literature, there is the risk of undermining the authentic experiences and representation of Queer individuals. Robyn McCullough notes how often Queer texts for young readers use the genres of "science fiction, horror, magic realism, and pure fantasy" (9). The notion of incorporating magical realism, supernatural qualities, or magical elements into Queer characters can be a means of empowerment because highlighting a character's unique abilities can provide visibility for LGBTQ+ representation. However, some readers may feel misrepresented or can misinterpret the magical aspects of these Queer characters as being grouped with "otherness" or "difference" (McCullough 10). The fantasy component in these texts, the author's world-building, and their Queer characters present Queerness as something extraordinary or mythical. This is evident in Anna-Marie McLemore's YA novel *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016), C.B. Lee's lower-level YA novel *Not Your Sidekick,* (2016) and Kai Cheng Thom's picture book *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* (2017). Through Lee's and Thom's books, we see the authors employing magical qualities in their Queer characters as an empowering form of representation for the LGBTQ+ community; however, these narratives suggest that societal acceptance of Queer individuals hinges on possessing extraordinary abilities or residing in unrealistic worlds. McLemore's novel challenges this idea by using magical realism to depict Queer characters within the confines of a world that mirrors our own, therefore demonstrating that the acceptance and validation of LGBTQ+ individuals do not solely rely on fantastical elements to be embraced within the nuances of everyday life.

In blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, magical realism offers the opportunity to normalize extraordinary elements within the everyday world;

however, in the context of Queer themes, readers could still misconstrue this as depicting Queer individuals as outsiders in a non-normative world. When it comes to YA literature, employing a specific genre such as magical realism is an effective way to gain the attention of young readers because it offers an escape into an imaginative world where the possibilities are limitless. According to B. and Muthusamy, "young readers interact with deeper understandings of LGBTQ identities, and the text itself, as they deal with elements of magical realism, [which] brings fluidity and intangibility to their understanding" (581). Thomas Crisp states how some authors "rely on magical realism to suspend reality, […] by showing [Queer] characters building relationships in an environment relatively free of discrimination" (336). B. and Muthusamy add that authors use magical realism "as a tool to expand and gain identity in [a] society" (579), as the emphasis on the magical qualities of their worlds can illustrate "that they are no different from the others in this society" (579). However, in *When the Moon Was Ours*, the magical aspects in this world negatively affect certain people in the story when McLemore employs magical abilities in her characters. These individuals, such as Miel, Aracely, and the Bonner Sisters, are also discriminated against, characterizing them as "strange" (21) or "witches" (54). McLemore uses magical realism to also highlight gender discrimination as one of the main conflicts in their society. The discrimination that her Queer characters experience shows how discrimination against Queer people is still being represented in both the author's and the Queer character's societies. A crucial character in this story is Aracely, a Queer individual who is a transwoman and freely lives with her true identity but possesses magical abilities. Later we find out that she is Miel's supposedly dead brother, who was transformed by the river into her true gender identity. Alongside her initial mysterious appearance and her secret magical transformation into a biological woman, McLemore portrays Aracely as a fantastical character who possesses a powerful healing ability for which she is sought out and valued. Aracely's ability to cure love sickness is effective and helpful to others throughout the novel, and this is evident with Emma Owens being one of her regular customers who comes to her after getting her heart broken repeatedly (56). Despite how her abilities benefit the townspeople who seek her out to help them cure their love sickness at night, they still call her a witch by morning, often giving "her the same inconsistency they might give a lover, adoration at night, disavowal in the morning" (22). Because the rest of society identifies Aracely as a witch, the book shows how she is alienated due to her magical powers and therefore characterizes her as different. Their behaviour reflects conditional acceptance as they temporarily value her to take advantage of her ability and exploit her for their own benefit only to

disregard her as an outsider again. Ultimately, Aracely's character and her mistreatment by the rest of society are representative of the struggles that Queer individuals face. She is not only mistreated by being marginalized and labelled as a witch, but the townspeople also exploit her for her magic abilities. These aspects of Aracely's complex and unique character and her experiences of being alienated from the rest of her society are representative of Queer individuals' experiences, specifically transgender people. By allowing forms of discrimination to exist in this world, McLemore provides an authentic representation of the kinds of issues Queer individuals are faced with. However, this form of representation through magical realism and magical qualities still highlights how Queer individuals are marginalized and characterized as different from others.

Contrary to how McLemore presents Aracely with magical powers, she does not give Sam magical powers: he continues to grapple with his transgender identity throughout the novel. Towards the end of the novel, Aracely is revealed to be Miel's older brother Leandro, prior to her transformation by the water (97). Although it is not completely clear in the novel how Aracely became "a woman, finished and grown" (97) or how she developed the ability to cure lovesickness, we can speculate that the water had felt her sorrow and her broken heart because she had failed to save her sister. That sorrow had aged her heart, made her grown instead of a child. So, the water made the outside of her show the truth in all ways, not just by making her a woman, but by making her old enough to match her bitter heart (97).

Aracely's powers not only represent her ability to overcome her past traumas of losing her family and living as a male, but they can also symbolize her healing and self-acceptance because of her gender transformation. However, they also earn her the label of "a bruja, a witch" (23). Unlike with Aracely, McLemore portrays Sam with a lack of magical powers to represent his struggle against his true identity and self-acceptance. In a desperate attempt to become a man, similar to how Aracely became a woman by the water, Sam throws himself into a river, in hopes that "if he gave himself up to it, maybe it would do to him what it had done to Aracely, turning him into what he truly was. Maybe it would give him a body that matched this life he had built. Or maybe it would make him want to be a woman called Samira" (122). Sam's fears and doubts about his gender identity not only represent his lack of powers, but they also restrict him from becoming who he wants to be. McLemore portrays Sam as a Queer individual who cannot fully embrace who they are to represent the challenges of coming out and not being accepted for who they truly are by the rest of society. Even with his lack of

magical abilities, Sam is still discriminated against as a Queer individual. This is evident when Sam finds out that the Bonner sisters use his birth certificate as blackmail against him and Miel (226–227). Together with characters such as Miel and the Bonner Sisters, Sam and Aracely are discriminated against for their magical abilities and their reputations for being "abnormal" which illustrates that either way, whether you have magical powers or identify as Queer, individuals who are viewed as different are alienated. Ultimately, McLemore's novel shows how society marginalizes people who do not choose to fit society's standards or norms.

In C.B. Lee's *Not Your Sidekick,* many of the Queer characters such as Bells, Jess, and Abby have superpowers, which can reinforce the idea that LGBTQ+ individuals are only valuable or empowered if they possess extraordinary abilities. According to Pearson et al., science fiction explores what certain elements of the world contribute to the way individuals navigate their own existence (6). The novel is set in a future far from our current society, where the value of a person relies on whether they possess superpowers or not. The public recognition of villains and the high praise of superheroes illustrate that those with meta-abilities have a specific place in society and society deems these individuals "special" (Lee 11) based on their powers. The genre of science fiction fantasy "notoriously reflect[s] contemporary realities back to us through the lens of a particular type of imagination, one associated with the future, with the potentials of technology, and with the important idea that life does not remain static" (Pearson et al. 3). In Lee's fictional world, she tackles the contemporary issue of racism in this story, which is evident when Orion insults Jess and her parents for not being "the ideal" superheroes because they are the only "refugees from the Southeast Asian Alliance in the League" (Lee 206). However, unrestricted gender identity is a relatively normalized aspect of this society, when identifying as Queer is widely accepted by this world. Crisp's statement that some authors use fantasy as a beneficial setting for Queer characters to escape reality (336) is apparent in other fantasy YA literature, too. Akwaeke Emezi's lower-level YA novel *Pet* (2019) is an example that demonstrates an author's advantageous world-building for Queer characters in fantasy YA literature. Emezi specifically uses speculative fiction to create a utopian society for the main character, Jam, to thrive in her true gender identity. With the concept of non-traditional gender and sexuality being completely normalized, her society's unified acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community allows emphasis on the science fiction/fantasy aspect instead. Similarly, Lee's novel has created a space for Queer characters to thrive and freely express their gender identities because this world's lack of Queer discrimination is

replaced with discrimination against supervillains. Although Jess, Abby, and Bells are defined as villains later in the novel, the discrimination committed against them is not for their sexuality or gender identity, but for their rebellion once they confront Orion. When we observe the relationship between Queer characters and the specific elements that allow them to navigate through this world, there seems to be a distinct connection between being meta-human and Queer simultaneously. An odd pattern forms as the few central protagonists who identify as Queer are the ones who develop or have superpower.[6] This is depicted through Jess, a bisexual character who originally does not seem to possess any super abilities despite her family's superhero legacy. However, after establishing a relationship with her girlfriend Abby, Jess discovers late into the book that she has had abilities after all. Abby also possesses meta-human abilities, as well as one of Jess's best friends Bells, a trans boy, who thrives as a masked hero under the alias Chameleon. With their superpowers, these characters all feel a sense of empowerment, which provides a sense of belonging for them. Their powers allow them to navigate in a society that values superhuman abilities without judgment of their gender or sexual identity. This leads to the perception that Queer individuals can only be accepted by society if they possess some unrealistic ability or live in a fantastical world. Ultimately, the portrayal of LGBTQ+ representation in this novel only highlights the Queer characters as interesting because of their powers, which not only overshadows their Queer individualities but also inadvertently marginalizes and alienates them as different from the general public.

In Kai Cheng Thom's children's picture book *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*, non-binary individuals are inconsistently represented through the child protagonist's magical abilities. Although the book does not specify the child protagonist's gender identity, Miu Lan's inability to "decide what to be" (23–25), visually shows that the book is meant to represent non-binary individuals' struggle to fit into either gender. The magical elements of non-human abilities are an important factor for the non-binary protagonist to become who they want to be by the end of the story (Miller 155). Yet, it is notable how the book tends to describe the magically Queer character as different or "VERY strange" (2), which can have a negative connotation when used in the context of representing the LGBTQ+ community. Jennifer Miller mentions in chapter one of her book *The Transformative Potential of LGBTQ+ Children's Picture Books,* that picture books "can position readers to experience difference, not as otherness, but as a potential point of identification that enables radical empathy across difference" (15). However, by

[6] However, one of the main characters in this novel, Emma, is asexual. She is Queer, but has no powers.

incorporating magical aspects into the main character of this story, Thom's picture book actually illustrates this idea of difference through "otherness." It portrays Miu Lan in a negative light, as they are Queer for their magical ability, which can translate to being "strange" (5) for being Queer. As Miu Lan faces challenges for being different in an environment that insists on fixed binaries, there is also an inconsistency throughout the story. The first few times they go to school, they are made fun of and mistreated by the other children for their magical traits, but, after their mother tells them that being different is okay, Miu Lan's experience at school changes and the other children at school finally accept them as a classmate. There is an odd and sudden shift in attitude towards Miu Lan by end the of the story, as they continue to showcase their magical traits at school, despite being marginalized and alienated for these traits at first. The story's underlying moral suggests that one must be true to oneself to be truly accepted by others. However, primarily depicting Queer characters through their magical abilities in fantasy literature often places the character's gender or sexual identity as secondary to their supernatural traits. Thus, emphasizing Miu Lan's magical ability to turn into whatever they want as a way of representing non-binary individuals is impractical: it not only overshadows their gender identity for their more interesting magical traits, but also teaches children that being non-binary is being unrealistic. Ultimately, the magic within this story can create unrealistic standards for young readers by suggesting that they are only valuable when they possess extraordinary abilities. It sets a precedent that can be harmful to real-life Queer individuals who cannot conform to these magical expectations, possibly making them feel as though they do not measure up to society's Queer expectations.

Employing magical elements within Queer children's picture books has captivated young readers for their enchanting illustrations, narratives, and representation of the LGBTQ+ community. But it has also depicted Queer characters as strange and different. The fantasy genre allows "the suspension of reality" (McCullough 1) to "create an escape that leaves us yearning for something better, a world where we can be ourselves without the pressure that comes with living in the confines of the real world" (1). However, creating this magical outlet for Queer characters to thrive in and equipping them with supernatural qualities implies that Queer individuals could only feel safe reading this genre because of the "otherness" that the fantasy genre provides. Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*, C.B. Lee's *Not Your Sidekick,* and Kai Cheng Thom's children's book, *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* all use magical elements to represent their Queer characters. However, unlike Lee and Thom's books,

McLemore's novel utilizes magic realism to provide a more nuanced representation of Queer characters along with their struggles and experiences, intertwined with the magical elements of their world. It should be necessary for writers and storytellers to navigate fantasy literature for YA and children with caution and ensure that the mythical worlds they create can contribute positively to the broader narrative of acceptance and diversity for Queer individuals. By using a completely fantasy world, it is riskier for authors to try to include Queer protagonists. Whereas magic realism, in its blending of the real world and the fantasy world, allows an author to be more careful and nuanced as they portray the experiences of Queer protagonists without entirely detaching the fantasy narrative from the familiar realities that Queer readers can relate to.

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