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LGBT Issues in the Works of Becky Albertalli
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Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná diplomová práce se bude věnovat problematice prezentace LGBT témat v literatuře pro mládež (Young Adult či YA), specificky v díle Becky Albertalli. V úvodní části diplomantka stručně uvede historický kontext tématu (nástin historie LGBT hnutí), vysvětlí základní pojmy, s nimiž bude pracovat (LGBT, YA literature, apod.), představí vybranou autorku a zařadí ji do širšího literárního kontextu (vč. žánrového zařazení) a svůj výběr zdůvodní. Uvede rovněž teoretický rámec tzv. queer studies, který pak v následných analýzách uplatní.

Jádrem práce pak bude analýza zvolených děl Becky Albertalli především s ohledem na LGBT témata (closet, coming-out, peer pressure, apod.). V analýze diplomantka rovněž zohlední literární aspekty děl a zhodnotí jejich efektivitu vzhledem k tematické rovině děl.

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Annotation

The main purpose of this diploma thesis is a literary analysis of the LGBTQ+ issues in Becky Albertalli's books. Firstly, topics such as LGBTQ+ history, Queer theory, representation of different sexualities and gender identities, and YA literature are discussed. Afterwards, books of Becky Albertalli are analysed and described in a greater detail.

Key words

LGBTQ+, Queer Theory, YA Literature, Coming Out

Název

Otázky LGBT v dílech Becky Albertalli

Anotace

Hlavní náplní této diplomové práce je literární analýza, která se zaměřuje na otázky LGBTQ+ tematiky v knihách Becky Albertalli. Nejprve se práce zaměřuje na témata jako jsou historie LGBTQ+, Queer teorie, zobrazení různých sexualit a genderových identit, a také YA literatura. Poté se pozornost přesouvá na knihy Becky Albertalli, které jsou detailně popsány.

Klíčová slova

LGBTQ+, Queer teorie, YA literatura, Coming out

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Introduction

To start with, the first chapter focuses on LGBTQ+ terms and their definitions. Since it is important to understand these terms if one wants to dive into the LGBTQ+ topic in a greater detail, all kinds of terms are explained. Terms such as being in the closet, coming out or even to be outed are explained alongside of the most important ones, for example, bisexuality and biphobia, gay and homophobia, queer. Knowing all of these terms will make it easier to navigate one's understanding of the topic later on, especially in the practical part of this thesis.

Afterwards, the focus is put on the LGBTQ+ history. At first, the world history is introduced briefly, and after that more specific events and movements are discussed, the focus shifting to the LGBTQ+ history in the United States. Events such as the Stonewall Riots, first gay pride marches or the legalisation of same-sex marriage are talked about in more detail. Moreover, the topic of AIDS epidemic is introduced as well as the shift in people's opinions on same-sex marriage during the 21st century, and LGBTQ+ identifying people in general, and thanks to it there being more people comfortable with identifying as a part of the community.

The focus of the next chapter is put on Queer Studies, otherwise known as Queer Theory. Firstly, the origin of the theory is discussed, pointing out that Queer theory might have come from the sphere of education but the cultural events which were happening around the time the theory started to emerge had also a big impact on it. Since this thesis focuses on the books that could be categorized as a part of the popular literature and therefore also the popular culture, a connection between Queer theory and popular culture is also talked about. To conclude this part, the implications and the future of Queer theory are summarized, pointing out that the theory is interdisciplinary and creates new ways of thinking.

The next chapter is about queer representation in the media. The representation of various identities is talked about as well as the phenomenon of "bury your friends" trope which points out that there are LGBTQ+ themed stories which, especially in the past, usually ended up tragically for the LGBTQ+ characters. Afterwards, two important terms are discussed. These being queer coding, which is mostly harmless and helps the authors to write about queerness in safety, and queerbaiting which is ultimately damaging for the LGBTQ+ community since it uses a tactic to lure in the queer audience while pretending there could be queer characters and relationships but never really acting up on it.

After that the thesis moves onto Becky Albertalli's career and her works as well as the topic that focuses on the question whether straight authors can write LGBTQ+ stories or not. Since there were people protesting, saying that only queer authors should write queer stories

because only they can portray the characters and their relationship authentically. However, what is also mentioned in this chapter is Albertalli's coming out as bisexual and the way she was somewhat forced to do so.

Before moving onto the practical part, issues of Young Adult literature are addressed, focus put mostly on queer YA literature. The history and the development of the genre are talked about, stating that the beginning of YA literature as an independent genre goes back to the first half of the 20th century. Moreover, it is explained that changing demographics in the USA promote understanding and tolerance among people which helps YA literature be more varied and focus on topics such as different religions, ethnicities, sexualities, etc. Then queer YA literature is discussed in a greater detail, also talking about the history of the subgenre and the way it developed from the books which often ended up in tragedy to those that are mostly positive, helping young readers to see that despite some struggles, they can live a happy life.

In the practical part, Becky Albertalli's books are introduced. Firstly, the plot of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is summarised. It is also said that it is Albertalli's debut book and it was also made into a film in 2018 which means that the story had an opportunity to reach wider LGBTQ+ audience, maybe inspiring them to read the book and pick up the others as well. Secondly, *Leah on the Offbeat* is described. It is pointed out that while it is similar to the previous book, the protagonist identifies as a bisexual and it is a story about a girl liking another girl which is not as common in today's literature. And thirdly, *What If It's Us* is introduced and the fact that it is a collaboration with another author is discussed.

After the introduction, the thesis moves onto the first book, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. It is explained that the topic of coming out is the most prominent when it comes to this book since the main character is a closeted boy thinking about coming out to his family and friends while also talking to his new friend, and later on love interest, Blue. They discuss everything LGBTQ+ related which helps Simon, because he does not have any friends who also identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, or so he thinks, who would talk to him about their own struggles. Simon coming out to various people in his life is discussed to a greater level. Also the readers' reaction to the book is briefly mentioned.

Then the focus moves onto a continuation of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, *Leah on the Offbeat*. It is explained that the protagonist is also closeted and tries to navigate this with starting to feel attracted to one of her friends Abby. The topic of being in the closet and coming out, especially to her best friend Simon, is described. Moreover, Leah and Abby's relationship and how it progresses throughout the book is discussed. Readers' reactions are also talked about.

After that, the attention is put on the last book called *What If It's Us*. It is explained that it is quite different from the other two books, because everything happens in New York, unlike in the so-called Simonverse which is in Atlanta, Georgia. What is also discussed is the fact that both protagonists are out to their friends and family, therefore, the novel is not focused on the topic of coming out, rather on the two boys' relationship. Their encounter with a homophobic person is also talked about. The realistic ending as well as the readers' reaction to (not only the ending) is described at the end of this chapter.

The last chapter is about all three books and putting them into context. It is explained how the market of queer YA literature changed and how easier it is to find an LGBTQ+ themed book with a happy ending or various sexualities and gender identities represented. What is also discussed is the way how LGBTQ+ people demand more representation and inclusivity and in return how that helps other queer people to come to terms with their sexuality or gender identity. The last part of this chapter is about the need of positive representation in times like these. Society may have come a long way from the times when people thought homosexuality was a mental disease, however, there are rising anti-LGBTQ+ tendencies in some states, especially in the south, therefore it is important to have books and other media that shows people the positive side of things.

1. LGBTQ+ Terms

Before one starts to write or read about anything LGBTQ+ related, it is important to understand at least the basic reoccurring terms that are connected to the LGBTQ+ topic. With society being progressively more open-minded and accepting of the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community, there are many new terms and words people can identify themselves with, however, for the purpose of this thesis, only those that will be discussed in the following chapters are explained. To avoid any confusion, the explanation of the terms is in alphabetical order.

To start with, a common term that is used among LGBTQ+ people and those who associate with them, is the word ally. According to Dictionary.com, an ally is someone that supports a cause with another individual or a group of people. Specifically, a straight ally is a person outside of the LGBTQ+ community that stands behind their fight for equality and rights.¹ In other words, it is someone who simply supports the community and their struggles for being recognized and equal to the social norm. Moreover, as described on the Human Rights Campaign website (HRC website from now on), an ally can be described as someone who is straight and cisgender, as well as those within the community who show their support to each other.² This could mean a bisexual showing their support to the transgender person, or a gay man supporting the lesbians.

Another term that is used very commonly, is bisexuality and with it connected biphobia. As explained on the HRC website, a bisexual is a person who is attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity. Sometimes, it is used interchangeably with pansexual.³ The problem connected with bisexuality is the issue of feeling like one is not welcome in the community, especially when one has preferences towards the opposite gender. Biphobia, as described on the HRC website, is the fear, hatred of, or discomfort with people who are bisexual.⁴ This being said, it is apparent that it is possible for bisexuals to be accepted by neither the majority of the society who is straight nor the community in which they should belong. According to Laken Kincaid, lesbians and gays often disregard bisexuality and unnecessarily question those who identify as bisexuals.⁵ Bisexuals are quite often asked when they are going to pick the side, told

¹ "Gender and Sexuality Dictionary: Ally," Dictionary.com, last modified December 20, 2018, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/gender-sexuality/ally/>.

² "Glossary of Terms," Human Rights Campaign, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>.

³ "Glossary of Terms."

⁴ "Glossary of Terms."

⁵ Laken Kincaid, "Biphobia and Acceptance in the LGBT Community," *The Carroll News*, June 17, 2021.

that it is just a phase, some sort of transition between being straight and gay, or they are seen as greedy or unfaithful just because they do not prefer one gender over the others.

Another term that one should get acquainted with is the term closet, more specifically the phrase being in the closet, or closeted. There are various definitions of this phrase, however, to put it simply, it is connected with not being out to people in one's life, in other words, keeping one's identity, be it gender or sexuality related, in private. As stated by Ariane Resnick, closets are small, dark places that are considered private, therefore it makes sense that hiding one's identity is connected with such places.⁶

Closely related to being in the closet is the term coming out. As explained on the HRC website, coming out is the process in which one acknowledges, accepts and appreciates their sexual preferences or gender identity and they begin to share it with their family, friends, and others.⁷ Sometimes, a phrase "out and proud" is associated and used with and by someone who came out to those around them.

The word gay is rather self-explanatory and so widely used, that people usually know what it means, a gay person is someone who is attracted to members of the same gender. It can be seen as both a term which refers to men who are attracted to men, but also as an umbrella term which means all men, women and non-binary people may use it when describing themselves.

Moving onto the term heteronormativity. Its definition, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality, is an assumption that everybody is by nature heterosexual, and identifying as straight is somehow superior to any other sexuality.⁸ This influences the mindsets of basically everybody in the society even though it is hard to catch upon since it has been so engraved and established by now that it is subconsciously accepted by everyone. Ariane Resnick, an author of the "What is Heteronormativity?" article, describes heteronormativity in a very similar way, stating that it is the idea that romantic and sexual relationships are always between one man and one woman. Heteronormativity assumes that it is a default orientation and the only normal way to express one's sexuality and attraction.⁹ All of this being said, heteronormativity is one of the reasons one might not realize they are gay until later in life or alternatively, seeing everyone around them and in

⁶ Ariane Resnick, "What Does It Mean to Be in the Closet," *Verywell Mind*, July 31, 2021.

⁷ "Glossary of Terms."

⁸ "Heteronormativity," The European Institute for Gender Equality, accessed May 24, 2022, <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1237>.

⁹ Ariane Resnick, "What is Heteronormativity?" *Verywell Mind*, January 2, 2022.

the media being straight, one can suppress their true sexuality in fear that it is not natural or normal.

Another term that should be talked about is homophobia. Similarly to biphobia, it is described on the HRC website as the fear, hatred of or discomfort with people, this time, those who are attracted solely to members of the same sex.¹⁰ This prejudice can lead to hatred or even being violent against people who identify as gay.

One of the terms that are connected to the topic of LGBTQ+ is outing. As explained on the HRC website, it is the act of exposing somebody's identity, be it lesbian, gay, bisexual or gender identity, without their permission.¹¹ This can have serious consequences on one's safety and stability, especially if it is a minor who cannot provide for themselves at the time. Not only would it influence them physically – they might be thrown out of their homes or lose their job –, but also mentally since being rejected in this kind of way leaves its impact in the long run.

Turning the attention to the next term frequently used within the community, the word queer can be a tricky one. As stated on the HRC website, it is a term that people use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations, however, the problem is that even though it can serve as an umbrella term, it was used as a slur in the past.¹² This being said, there are people who use this word to identify themselves, but others still see it as something with a negative connotation and want to distance themselves from it. Moreover, people who are not a part of the LGBTQ+ community should be wary and careful about using the word to describe someone in an attempt to avoid unnecessary confusion or even a conflict. As described on the LGBT Community Center website, it used to be considered as a pejorative term, it has been reclaimed by some LGBTQ+ people, however, it is still not a universally accepted term even within the community.¹³

One of the last terms that should be addressed is the term questioning. As defined on the HRC website, it is used to describe people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁴ In other words, people are discovering their identity which can be difficult at times, mostly because of the aforementioned heteronormativity, the societal norms and other people's attitudes, but it can also be fun and helpful. According to LGBTQ+ Resource Center, the process of questioning can be stressful and frightening but also affirming

¹⁰ "Glossary of Terms."

¹¹ "Glossary of Terms."

¹² "Glossary of Terms."

¹³ "What is LGBTQ?" The Center, accessed May 24, 2022, <https://gaycenter.org/about/lgbtq/>.

¹⁴ "Glossary of Terms."

and joyful.¹⁵ To put it differently, being able to explore one's sexuality or identity can help them in making sense of feelings and thoughts they have been experiencing. This process of questioning commonly happens during one's teenage years or young adulthood since it is the period during which they are finding their place in life and establishing their identity in general. Although it must be said that it can occur later on in one's life, especially if one did not have an outlet and resources that the younger generations have nowadays.

To finish this chapter, it is rather important to explain the acronym LGBTQ+, its many versions, and the evolution behind it. As stated on the HRC website, the acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer with a "+" sign which signals the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities that are the part of the community.¹⁶ As the society becomes more open-minded and willing to recognize the diversity of various sexualities and identities, the acronym seems to gain more and more letters.

According to Erin Blakemore, in the 1990s, there was a widespread adoption of the LGB acronym because of the longstanding bonds between people who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual.¹⁷ The acronym was not all set, sometimes people used GLB as the focus was historically put more on men's issues, however, with the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and 1990s when a large number of gay men were suffering from AIDS, the lesbian community was largely unaffected and ready to help. As it is claimed on The Foreword website, lesbians were the ones helping gay men with medical care and also stood behind a big part of the activism around the gay community and AIDS at the time.¹⁸ This display of solidarity led to a rise in feminism within the community which resulted in the push to have the "L" come first in the acronym.

Transgender people have struggled for quite a long time to be included in the community. As reported by Blakemore, it was not until the 2000s that they were widely considered a part of the LGBTQ+ community.¹⁹ Following this, one of the most recent additions to the acronym are the letters Q, I, and A, meaning queer, intersex, and asexual respectively.

¹⁵ "Questioning," LGBTQ+ Resource Center, accessed May 24, 2022, <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/questioning/>.

¹⁶ "Glossary of Terms."

¹⁷ Erin Blakemore, "From LGBT to LGBTQIA+: The evolving recognition of identity," *National Geographic*, October 19, 2021.

¹⁸ "The "L" In LGBT, And Why Order Matters," The Foreword, November 19, 2019, <https://theforeword.org/832/editorials/the-l-in-lgbt-and-why-order-matters/>.

¹⁹ Blakemore, "From LGBT to LGBTQIA+."

With the increase of the known terms one can identify themselves with, there comes a problem and a possible confusion when it comes to recognizing individual sexualities and gender identities. According to Jeffrey J. Iovannone, one expanded version of the acronym is LGBTQQIP2SAA, which stands for: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two spirits, asexual, and ally.²⁰ Just one look at the acronym, it is quite obvious what the problem is. While this version is certainly inclusive, it is not necessarily efficient and can cause confusion, especially when the person trying to learn about the community is just starting to dive into the topic and has never come across any material with such a topic. As said by Iovannone, it is difficult to remember, let alone say, and it will result in giving those who are not familiar with the community a terminology lesson.²¹ Inclusivity is, of course, important, however, the effectivity of getting people to learn and get to know the LGBTQ+ topics could be affected by the acronym being way too complicated for both the general public and the members of the community.

To conclude this chapter, as it was explained earlier on, there is not one correct acronym that is universally used, however, for the purpose of this thesis, LGBTQ+ is used since it is one of the most common ones and the “+” symbol signals there is more to the acronym than just the initial five letters.

²⁰ Jeffrey J. Iovannone, “A Brief History of the LGBTQ Initialism,” *Medium*, June 9, 2018.

²¹ Iovannone, “A Brief History.”

2. LGBTQ+ History

People with same-sex attraction have always existed with various degrees of acceptance shown from the society. As claimed by Lauren Rowello, queer experiences and identities are neither new nor specific to one culture. Queer people can be found everywhere in the world and live in various contexts.²² Historically speaking, the concept of having a specific sexual identity did not really exist before the late-19th century. According to Iovannone, people in the past lived similarly to the modern understanding of what it means to be LGBTQ+. Historical terminology used to describe sexuality and gender simply lacked the specificity that exists nowadays.²³ To put it simply, the understanding and the concept of one's sexuality is a dynamic and ever evolving issue.

As explained by Nikki Sullivan, sexuality, as we understand it, is constructed, experienced and understood in culturally and historically specific ways. Moreover, categories like heterosexuality, homosexuality, or bisexuality define specific kinds of relationships and practices and have not operated in all cultures at all times.²⁴ This only proves what has already been said, that the concept of sexuality existed in various forms throughout the history and culture, although it might have not been acknowledged as a specific category.

As it was mentioned, the acceptance of people who experience same-sex attraction varied throughout the history. Even though same-sex interaction might even have been encouraged in the past, in the last few centuries it was mostly frowned upon, at least in the western culture. To prove this, a few examples are to be introduced, the first one being the Trial of Oscar Wilde. As described on the Teaching LGBTQ History website, in 1895, Oscar Wilde was convicted for gross indecency (relationships with other men) and was sentenced to serve two years in jail.²⁵ This is an example of an individual being punished for same-sex attraction, however, for instance, during the WWII, thousands of homosexual men were sent to concentration camps alongside the Jewish. This proves that people were prosecuted in masses for their sexuality.

Moving onto the history of the United States, there are also examples of people being oppressed to a certain degree for being attracted to the same sex as theirs. For instance, in 1950, homosexuality was classified as a mental illness and in 1952 it was pushed to even more

²² Lauren Rowello, "What You Might Not Know about Queer History," *Verywell Mind*, July 22, 2021.

²³ Iovannone, "A Brief History."

²⁴ Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 1.

²⁵ "LGBTQ Rights Timeline in American History," Teaching LGBTQ History, accessed May 25, 2022, <https://www.lgbtqhistory.org/lgbt-rights-timeline-in-american-history/>.

extreme opinion. As it was mentioned on the Teaching LGBTQ History website, The American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual listed homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disturbance that could be treated.²⁶ This is obviously an issue since one's sexuality is not something that should be seen as being treatable, as it is not any kind of disease whatsoever. However, at the time, it used to be seen in this kind of way.

A turning point came with the 1960s. The gay rights movement saw some progress in the 1960s. According to History.com, in 1961, Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexuality. Moreover, a local TV station in California aired the first documentary about homosexuality.²⁷ Slowly, people started to become more open-minded when it came to the LGBTQ+ topic, although being attracted to the same sex still was not something that would be celebrated by the general public.

One of the most important events in the LGBTQ+ history is the one of the Stonewall Riots that took place in 1969. As described on the Teaching LGBTQ History, in response to a police raid of The Stonewall Inn, which was a gay bar in Greenwich Village in NYC, over 400 people protested their treatment and pushed police away from the area.²⁸ Rioting continued for the next few days and the event became a pivotal moment for LGBTQ+ rights. As reported by Tom Geoghegan, Stonewall Riots have even been described as the Rosa Parks moment for gay rights.²⁹ This shows how important the event really was. The riot helped start the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement and the push for gay equality. Moreover, as claimed by Erin Blakemore, in 1970, activists commemorated its anniversary with what they called Christopher Street Liberation Day.³⁰ This is now known as the first gay pride march. Together with the New York City march, there were marches in Los Angeles and Chicago. The next year even more cities joined in, for example, Boston, Dallas, but also some of the European cities such as London, Paris and Stockholm.

Going back to the LGBTQ+ history in the USA, one of the more important moments that needs to be mentioned since it has hugely affected the LGBTQ+ identifying people in the USA, is the AIDS epidemic which began in the 1980s. As stated on the Teaching LGBTQ History, a total of 583,298 U.S. men, women and children died from AIDS through 2007.³¹

²⁶ "LGBTQ Rights Timeline."

²⁷ "Gay Rights," History, last modified May 19, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/history-of-gay-rights>.

²⁸ "LGBTQ Rights Timeline."

²⁹ Tom Geoghegan, "Stonewall: A Riot that changed millions of lives," *BBC News*, June 17, 2019.

³⁰ Erin Blakemore, "How the Stonewall uprising ignited the modern LGBTQ rights movement," *National Geographic*, June 26, 2020.

³¹ "LGBTQ Rights Timeline."

Such a high number might have been a consequence of the Reagan administration's lack of reaction. According to German Lopez, Reagan and his administration did not take the epidemic very seriously at first, treating it almost as a joke.³² Even though the reason behind it is probably simply knowing too little about the disease and thinking it only affects the gay people – which is still no reason to not treat it seriously – Reagan administration is heavily criticized for such reaction.

Moving onto a more recent topic, it is important to mention the legalization of same-sex marriage and, connected to it, general public opinion on same-sex relationships. As described in an HRC article, *The Journey to Marriage Equality in the United States*, efforts to legalise it began to surface across the country during the 1990s.³³ However, even though people started to call for marriage equality, it took over fifteen years to finally reach this goal. There were various obstacles that needed to be overcome. For instance, The Defense of Marriage Act was signed into law in 1996 by the federal government, which meant the marriage was seen as between a man and a woman, allowing individual states to deny marriage equality. As stated by Kathleen DeLacy, it prevented same-sex couples whose marriages were recognized by their home states from receiving many benefits that were available to other married couples under federal law.³⁴ Although the road to marriage equality was a long one, it all came to an end in June 2015 when same-sex marriage was legalized on a federal level.

Connected to this is the opinion of the general public. As claimed by Danielle Kurtzleben, public opinion on the issue of same-sex relationships and marriage swung swiftly and decisively and there was not much of an uproar once it was legal nationwide.³⁵ This being said, it certainly does not mean that everyone was in favour of same-sex marriage. When looking at polls conducted by an analytics and advisory company Gallup Inc, it is obvious that progress has been made.

As reported by Frank Newport, in 2011, a majority of American public believed same-sex marriage should be recognized by the law as valid which happened for the first time since the tracking of this issue began.³⁶ Until that point, quite a large part of Americans were in favour of same-sex marriage, however, it never was over 50%. To illustrate the increasing

³² German Lopez, "The Reagan administration's unbelievable response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic," *Vox*, December 1, 2016.

³³ "The Journey to Marriage Equality in the United States," Human Rights Campaign, accessed May 25, 2022, <https://www.hrc.org/our-work/stories/the-journey-to-marriage-equality-in-the-united-states>.

³⁴ Kathleen DeLacy, "Supreme Court Decision on the Defense of Marriage Act," *Reger Rizzo & Darnall LLP*, February 8, 2022.

³⁵ Danielle Kurtzleben, "The story of marriage equality is more complicated — and costly — than you remember," *National Public Radio*, December 31, 2021.

³⁶ Frank Newport, "For First Time, Majority of Americans Favor Legal Gay Marriage," *Gallup*, May 20, 2011.

number of people being supportive, according to Newport, two-thirds of Americans were opposed to legalized same-sex marriage in 1996 with 27% in favour. By 2004, the support had risen to 42%.³⁷ These numbers are evidence that more and more people are more open-minded and supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, however, one still must be wary and careful when it comes to certain regions of the USA.

To conclude this chapter, the progress is evident when it comes to the LGBTQ+ rights. Thanks to all the movements and people fighting for equality, people can be more comfortable being who they truly are and live their lives authentically. Unlike in the 1960s, being a part of the LGBTQ+ community is not illegal, being attracted to the same sex is not frowned upon as much as it was in the past. Because of this, there are more people identifying as a part of the LGBTQ+ community. Sometimes people argue that being queer is trendy nowadays but the reality is far from that. As explained by Lauren Rowello, people simply feel safe questioning and exploring their sexualities and identities because society and peers are more accepting and affirming.³⁸ However, as it was mentioned before, it still largely depends on where in the states one is. There are states that are more liberal and those who are more conservative and therefore, people might not be as open-minded and think progressively. In conclusion, the progress made over the last few decades was amazing but there are still areas that need to be worked on in the future.

³⁷ Newport, "Legal Gay Marriage."

³⁸ Lauren Rowello, "What You Might Not Know."

3. Queer Theory

When talking about the LGBTQ+ topics and history, one cannot forget about Queer studies, also known as Queer theory, as it plays a crucial role in the understanding of the LGBTQ+ topic. To start with, it is important to say that Queer Theory is a very complex subject and it might be rather difficult to define it. One of the definitions, by Kim Leonard, says that Queer theory is a way of thinking that dismantles traditional assumptions about gender and sexual identities. Its goal is to challenge traditional academic approaches and fight against social inequality.³⁹ This shows how important it is when it comes to the LGBTQ+ topics since it does not just describe the issues connected to it but actively tries to change the societal views on it for the better. It is similarly described by Lynne Joyrich, who states that Queer studies are committed to challenging and troubling ideological norms, offering powerful sites of cultural and political resistance.⁴⁰ This only emphasises the important role the Queer theory has overall.

Queer theory emerged in the late 1980s and, according to Adam Isaiah Green, it was the time in Western scholarship when debates around the ontology of sexual orientation and gender had reached a tired dead-end.⁴¹ Since the debates had reached such a point, it makes sense that Queer theory started around this time, bringing a new way to look and study this topic. It represents a departure from previous scholarship about sexuality and gender. Moreover, as explained on the Illinois Library website, Queer theory's origins are hard to define since it came from multiple critical and cultural contexts, including feminism, post-structuralist theory, radical movements of people of colour, the gay and lesbian movement and also AIDS activism.⁴² This shows that the beginnings of Queer theory might have been in the sphere of education but the cultural events which were happening around the time the theory started to come into life also had a huge impact. For example, activists who pushed back against the government and the lack of action after the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic at the end of 1980s. As described on the Illinois Library website, activist groups like ACT-UP and Queer Nation took the lead to force attention to both the AIDS epidemic and the community as a whole.⁴³ Such groups helped define the field because by pointing out the mistakes the

³⁹ Kim Leonard, "What is Queer Theory? Definition and Examples for Filmmakers," *StudioBinder*, November 15, 2020.

⁴⁰ Lynne Joyrich, "Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams," *Cinema Journal*, Winter 2014 53, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 133.

⁴¹ Adam Isaiah Green, "Queer Theory and Sociology: Locating the Subject and the Self in Sexuality Studies," *Sociological Theory* 25, No. 1 (March 2007): 27.

⁴² "Queer Theory: Background," Illinois Library, last modified February 21, 2022, <https://guides.library.illinois.edu/queertheory/background>.

⁴³ "Queer Theory: Background."

government's lack of actions cause, they highlighted a non-normative option to the more traditional identity politics. To sum up, there have been studies which focused on the topic of gender and sexuality, however, Queer theory is much newer and differs from the previous studies and theories because it challenges the notion of defined and finite identity categories and binary norms.

Now it is time to move onto a connection between Queer theory and popular culture, since the topic of this thesis is about books that could be categorized as a part of it. As stated by Nikki Sullivan, there is no single correct way to approach queer popular culture because it has taken varied forms, focused on different issues, and has drawn on a range of theoretical positions which are often on conflicting ends.⁴⁴ It seems valid to say that the relationship between Queer theory and popular culture is both political and cultural. As Sullivan describes, queering popular culture involves a range of reading and writing practices that are political because they want to expose the means by which sexuality is textually constituted, and queer theory is cultural because it concerns itself with the ways in which cultural texts form our understanding and experiences of sexuality and subjectivity.⁴⁵ These texts can be in many forms, for instance, books, films, television programmes, magazines and so on.

From the explanation in the previous paragraph, queering popular culture seems to involve critical engagement with cultural artefacts in order to explore the ways in which meaning of all kinds of different identities are made in different types of texts. However, although this notion might seem straightforward, it is difficult to realise how one goes about it. As explained by Sullivan, queer readings and positions can and do become modified over time as people, cultures, and politics change.⁴⁶ By saying this, it is suggested that queerness does not reside in the text but is produced in and through the relations between texts, readers, and the world in general. This is nicely illustrated by Kim Leonard who wrote that Queer theory shows that there have always been queer characters in stories although they may have been coded to be hidden in plain sight.⁴⁷ Coded or not, it is obvious that even though something was written decades ago, it can be read through various points of view that are completely different, one of them being LGBTQ+ and Queer theory related.

To sum this up, analysing with a perspective of Queer theory has the potential to undermine the base structure on which any identity stands. The theory has been understood to

⁴⁴ Sullivan, "A Critical Introduction," 189.

⁴⁵ Sullivan, "A Critical Introduction," 191.

⁴⁶ Sullivan, "A Critical Introduction," 191.

⁴⁷ Leonard, "What is Queer Theory?"

be just about the issues of sexuality. However, as stated on the Illinois library website, such perception has been opposed by having an intersectional approach that is based on the belief that sexuality cannot be disconnected from the other categories of social status and identity.⁴⁸ Having such approach enables Queer theory to become interdisciplinary and, subsequently, create new ways of thinking. As for the future of Queer theory, queer theorists disagree on many things but they are more or less united when it comes to the way Queer theory should be understood – as a way to question the established and stable categories of identity.

⁴⁸ “Queer Theory: Background.”

4. Portrayal of the LGBTQ+ Issues

What directly corresponds with both the LGBTQ+ history and Queer Theory, is the portrayal and representation of the LGBTQ+ issues in literature. To put it simply correct and positive representation of queer identifying people matters. Many of the queer stories are a part of the Young Adult literature and, therefore, target young audience, which can be seen as a positive thing because they have an outlet to discover their sexuality and not be scared or ashamed of it. Seeing characters that are like them in the books, television shows and films must have an amazingly positive effect on their journey of discovering themselves.

Now it is time to move onto the question of representation and portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities in literature. As it was already mentioned, representation in literature is an important issue since it can influence anybody and quite literally change their life, especially if they are a member of a minority. As stated by Angela Ackerman, Deborah Dixon, who is an author, editor, and racial justice activist, is rather often asked to offer insight on what is the best way to include characters of diverse backgrounds, specifically, those of underrepresented groups such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ persons, religious minorities, etc.⁴⁹ This shows that the issue became quite a significant one not only in literature but also throughout the whole entertainment industry.

According to Ackerman, there are two primary reasons why representation is important and those are inclusivity and perception.⁵⁰ When one sees people who look, act, and experience life similarly to them, it can make them feel included in society even though they might not feel like it when looking at their close surroundings. Moreover, it can reinforce positive views of themselves and what they can achieve.

Similar views are portrayed by James Dawson in his article about the importance of LGBTQ+ visibility. He talks about his experience of being gay in the world where it was not common for the LGBTQ+ group to be represented. He describes the way he was unaware gay people existed, how lost he used to feel, and how he wished there had been at least one book with a character who was a little bit like him – a normal teenage boy who happened to be gay.⁵¹ This is just one example among many. There are multiple people who address this topic and talk about their experience. This proves that the representation of people of different backgrounds is needed. As Dawson says, it is his hope that all young people who identify

⁴⁹ Angela Ackerman, "Representation in Literature: Why It's Important & How To Handle It," *Writers Helping Writers*, October 10, 2018.

⁵⁰ Ackerman, "Representation in Literature."

⁵¹ James Dawson, "The Importance of LGBT Visibility in Children's Books," *The Guardian*, May 13, 2014.

themselves as a part of the LGBTQ+ community can see themselves in fiction and recognize there is a place for them in the world.⁵² This can quite easily come true since there is a diverse range of LGBTQ+ themed books nowadays.

What is rather important is that all letters of the LGBTQ+ should be represented, not just the most common one which is a gay male. As mentioned in the article by Amelia Abraham, many of the people who identify themselves as a part of the LGBTQ+ grew up with no examples of what it is like to be LGBTQ+ within home, even though their parents could be accepting of their sexuality. They were simply not very interested in queer history and Abraham also grew up without any queer female role models in her life.⁵³ This enforces the idea that there is a need for representation of other identities, not just gay-identifying men. Abraham discussed the topic of representation with three people from different generations and backgrounds, one of them being Mohsin. According to him, stories shape cultures and if one does not hear stories about something that is a part of them, that part cannot possibly develop and mature at the same pace as the rest.⁵⁴

Another person who was a part of the discussion is Artie. They went looking for queer literature in the 2010s and found there was a large amount of LGBTQ+ literature that met their needs and desires. However, they still have something to add to the discussion. According to them, more kids – whether they are straight, queer or questioning – should have access to LGBTQ+ themed literature as it would help build understanding from a younger age and minimise bullying.⁵⁵ They heard quite a lot of inappropriate and offensive remarks while growing up and LGBTQ+ fiction becoming more mainstream could help to prevent it from happening.

All of these stories show that it is important for someone who is a part of a minority, in this case the LGBTQ+ community, to see their sexualities and various gender identities represented in the media because it can help them to feel accepted, to see that they are not alone and in some cases help them realise that they are not somehow weird or unnatural. It can happen rather often that people are told that any other sexuality than heterosexuality and other gender identity than being cisgender is wrong, especially in the regions in which Christianity is still very prominent and plays an important role in people's lives. Seeing people who are like them helps (not only) younger audience accept who they are, see that it is completely natural and it

⁵² Dawson, "The Importance of LGBT Visibility."

⁵³ Amelia Abraham, "'Solace, Joy and a Lifeline': Why Queer Literature is Vital for People Growing Up LGBTQ+," *Penguin Books UK*, February 5, 2020.

⁵⁴ Abraham, "Solace, Joy and a Lifeline."

⁵⁵ Abraham, "Solace, Joy and a Lifeline."

can also help them to find a way to come out and, eventually, live their lives to the fullest, being their authentic selves.

Nowadays, there is a lot of positive representation of the LGBTQ+ identities, however, it was not always the case. As is mentioned by Bee Oder, most people who seek out LGBTQ+ content are probably fairly familiar with the “bury your gays” trope.⁵⁶ This basically means that the LGBTQ+ characters are not given a happy ending and quite often die in the story. It is also commonly referred to as “dead lesbian syndrome.” These tropes support the idea that people who identify as a part of LGBTQ+ community are destined for a tragic life with a tragic ending. To support this point, Oder stated that lesbian pulp fiction of the 1950s and 1960s frequently portrayed lesbians as evil and somewhat a threat to happy heterosexuals and their “normal” way of life.⁵⁷ There are many examples of “bury your gays”, for example in the story *Brokeback Mountain*, where two shepherds develop a relationship, however, it becomes complicated when they both get married to their respective girlfriends. They drift away and never end up together.

Similarly, representation of queer women shows quite a brutal statistics. According to Ginn Hale, the preponderance of representation that queer people have been offered has always been largely negative. Only six years ago, in 2016 alone, queer women represented less than 1% of all characters depicted on TV, however they made up to 10% of deaths.⁵⁸ This proves that there is still a long way to go from the LGBTQ+ characters being depicted as villains who deserve a violent death or as tragic victims to have LGBTQ+ people be simply “normal” and even out both the number of characters who are LGBTQ+ or heterosexual and their deaths.

It should be pointed out that the “bury your gays” trope is more common for television and films. As explained by Amanda Jean, in a time when queer characters in mainstream media are killed and denied happy endings, and what is more, seem to be created for straight audience, many LGBTQ+ identifying people turn to books to find themselves.⁵⁹ Jean suggests that teenagers nowadays deserve stories where the queer characters do not die and somebody loves them. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that they can have stories like that thanks to the authors and the books about systematic oppression and loss that laid the base for genres like queer YA and romance. It is emphasised that this genre should not be divorced from its legacy.

⁵⁶ Bee Oder, “Happily Queer After: On Seeking Happy Endings in LGBT Books,” *Book Riot*, September 30, 2018.

⁵⁷ Oder, “Happily Queer After.”

⁵⁸ Ginn Hale, “The Real-Life Importance of Happy Endings for Queer Characters,” *The Mary Sue*, October 11, 2017.

⁵⁹ Amanda Jean, “Growing Up Reading Queer: The Legacy of Tragic Endings,” *The Coil – Medium*, August 23, 2016.

When talking about LGBTQ+ representation in the media, it is also important to mention two terms that go hand in hand with it, which are queer coding and queerbaiting. Described by Adiba Jaigirdar, there is much more outright representation of queerness in western media, and particularly in literature, today than there was one or two decades ago.⁶⁰ However, that does not mean queer coding and queerbaiting are solely an issue of the past as it still happens in today's works.

The explanation made by Jaigirdar is quite simple, queer coding means that the characters may not be explicitly stated to be queer, but there is enough subtext available for an audience to read them as queer.⁶¹ With this in mind, queer coding is neither negative nor positive. Looking at it from the historical point of view, queer-coded characters have been written about when authors could not write about LGBTQ+ issues since they were not generally accepted. That being said, it is not just a question of the past, queer coding still has an important place in media now, because many people could be frowned upon, or even persecuted, for writing about LGBTQ+ characters. As stated by Jaigirdar, a great example of this is the popular Chinese fantasy show *The Untamed* based on a web novel. While in the novel, the two main characters are explicitly queer, because of Chinese media censorship, these characters are simply coded as queer in the TV show.⁶² This shows that queer coding is, indeed still needed and rather prominent in today's media, even though it is not strictly western culture related.

Many examples of how characters have been queer coded exist. Moreover, the idea of what is queer coded can change over the times. For instance, a lot of female characters in both books and films, who go against the societal norms of what is expected of them, are often read as queer coded. Similarly, male characters with more feminine traits have also been read as queer coded. Seeing this, it is obvious that queer coding is mostly a harmless way to portray characters as LGBTQ+ when it is not generally accepted.

With that in mind, queer coding can be used in a very negative way. According to Jaigirdar, one of the more famous examples of queer coding in media is Disney and, historically, many of Disney's villains have been coded as queer.⁶³ This can be seen as truly harmful towards those who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community since it, again, shows characters who are supposedly like them in a bad way and quite often with a tragic ending. In this case, queer coding has been used to negatively impact queer people, if intentional or not.

⁶⁰ Adiba Jaigirdar, "What Is Queerbaiting vs Queer Coding?" *Book Riot*, July 9, 2021.

⁶¹ Jaigirdar, "Queerbaiting vs Queer Coding."

⁶² Jaigirdar, "Queerbaiting vs Queer Coding."

⁶³ Jaigirdar, "Queerbaiting vs Queer Coding."

With everything being said, queer coding is not inherently bad but if it is used to portray only villains rather than heroes in popular culture, it can and does have an incredibly harmful impact. On the other hand, as opposed to queer coding, queerbaiting is essentially bad and can be very harmful towards those who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Explained by Colleen Murphy, queerbaiting, also known as the bait-and-switch tactic, is a marketing ploy that pretends there is queerness in a story but never actually delivers it.⁶⁴ This usually happens in the realm of television shows, but it can also happen in movies, music, books and other types of media. Through plots, characters, or even interviews with directors, writers and actors, the LGBTQ+ audience is drawn in under the promise of seeing or reading about people like them only for it to never be truly fulfilled. Looking at another source on queerbaiting, Jaigirdar describes queerbaiting very similarly, saying that it is only used to draw queer audience into a piece of media, however, its intention is never to meaningfully explore queerness.⁶⁵ The story gains a following from the LGBTQ+ community while never really showing a positive queer representation.

As for why queerbaiting happens, it is fairly simple. It brings the LGBTQ+ audience in, while also bringing their money. It is basically creators wanting the money of the queer audience when not ever representing them. As reported by Murphy, the practice was especially big in the early to mid-2010s when it was still seen as a “risk” to include queer characters and queer couples on popular shows or even in books.⁶⁶ Because of this the stories were essentially never portraying nor giving representation to the LGBTQ+ community, but they still want to maintain the fan base so they teased the queer part of it with a possibility of having a queer love but never really acting on it.

When it comes to the way it influences the LGBTQ+ audience, it is clear that it can be truly harmful. According to Murphy, while some people might overlook the importance of showing different relationships in the media, there is a lot of value in visibility and queerbaiting can cause a lot of harm to the psyche.⁶⁷ Since the members of the LGBTQ+ community may not see themselves represented all that much, the portrayed relationships mean a great deal to them. The characters are much more than that, they can serve as models for the queer audience, and when they are taken away from them by never realizing their possible queerness, it is a great loss to the audience. As explained by Murphy, the bait-and-switch tactics compound

⁶⁴ Colleen Murphy, “What Is Queerbaiting? Here's What the Manipulative Marketing Tactic Looks Like—and Why It's Harmful,” *Health*, September 10, 2021. <https://www.health.com/mind-body/lgbtq-health/queerbaiting>

⁶⁵ Jaigirdar, “Queerbaiting vs Queer Coding.”

⁶⁶ Murphy, “What Is Queerbaiting?”

⁶⁷ Murphy, “What Is Queerbaiting?”

mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, that queer identifying people are already more likely to face and never seeing themselves reflected in the media is another form of social isolation.⁶⁸ Moreover, not only does queerbaiting influence the LGBTQ+ community, it also stigmatizes it and by doing so prevents the general public from seeing LGBTQ+ people as normal, everyday people who can have happy, healthy lives out in the open. In other words, queerbaiting is a form of queer people being erased and dismissed which can be obviously very damaging.

To conclude, it is important to know the difference between queer coding and queerbaiting. While the former is mostly harmless and helps people to write about LGBTQ+ topics in a safe way, the latter is ultimately damaging. As Jaigirdar says, queer coding can often help the authors express queerness in their work but queerbaiting continues to take space from queer creators and cause a lot of harm to the queer community.⁶⁹

While looking at these problems that can occur with LGBTQ+ representation in media, one realizes how important it is to have stories like the ones Albertalli's written, because they not only really show queer characters but what is more, the representation is a positive one.

There are various LGBTQ+ issues, the portrayal and representation of the LGBTQ+ community that can be observed in books by Becky Albertalli, namely *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, *Leah on the Offbeat*, and a collaboration book with Adam Silvera, *What If It's Us*. And most importantly, even though the books deal with the negative aspects of being gay/bisexual, the characters' journey is mostly a positive one and all of these books end with a happy ending which, as it was discussed, is a very important aspect for a lot of the LGBTQ+ readers.

And although Albertalli mostly focuses on the sexuality that is the most typical to be represented nowadays, she also writes about bisexuality and wlw (women loving women) relationships, namely in *Leah on the Offbeat*. Furthermore, while still focusing on the mlm (men loving men) relationship in *What If It's Us*, it is not the focal point of the story, rather something that is in the background of everything else the characters have to go through. It shows that even though the characters identify as gay, it is not the most important part of their identity and they live through the same things as their heterosexual peers.

⁶⁸ Murphy, "What Is Queerbaiting?"

⁶⁹ Jaigirdar, "Queerbaiting vs Queer Coding."

5. Can Straight Authors Write LGBTQ+ Stories?

Moving forward to the next topic, now is the time to introduce Becky Albertalli and focus on the issue of straight authors writing LGBTQ+ stories and whether it is fine or not since there was an uproar of people protesting, saying that only LGBTQ+ authors should write such stories since it is them who can portray the characters and what they go through authentically. Moreover, it should be queer authors who profit from LGBTQ+ books and not the straight people. This is all connected to the #ownvoices movement. It is important to mention that Albertalli nowadays identifies herself as a bisexual but it was not always the case and it caused a debate whether she should be writing queer stories or not.

Albertalli is an American author of young adult fiction, known mostly for writing *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, which was also adapted into a movie called Love, Simon. She attended Wesleyan University before moving to Washington where she earned her Doctor of Psychology degree from George Washington University. Afterwards she worked as a psychologist until 2012 when she decided to write her first novel, aforementioned *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. According to the WHSmith website, her novel caused quite a reaction in the world of Young Adult fiction when it was first published in 2015.⁷⁰ It became a success rather quickly, and being made into a film very soon after is a proof of it.

However, the reaction was not always positive. As stated by Daisy Finefrock, the author received multiple accusations that she was profiting off of the LGBTQ+ community. She has been confronted by the #ownvoices movement which is of an opinion that authors should only tell stories about communities to which they personally belong.⁷¹ It probably comes as no surprise that after the book became the hit movie in 2018, the pressure towards Albertalli increased even more. People were simply wondering why a cisgender heterosexual woman knew enough to write such an insightful book about being in the closet and the issue of coming out.

Shortly after the book came out, Albertalli claimed her intention was to write a joyful love gay story for young readers who might need a reminder that such love stories exist. As mentioned by Soniah Kamal, Albertalli, being a clinical psychologist, had worked with gender and sexuality nonconforming children in the past, which might have helped to inspire her when

⁷⁰ “Becky Albertalli Discusses Young Adults Struggling with Identity,” WHSmith Blog, last modified February 14, 2018, <https://blog.whsmith.co.uk/becky-albertalli-discusses-young-adults-struggling-with-identity/>.

⁷¹ Daisy Finefrock, “‘Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda’ by Becky Albertalli,” *The Independent*, September 14, 2020.

she was coming up with the story of her first book.⁷² Similarly, it was stated on the WHSmith website that the author had worked with many children, teenagers and adults during her time as a practising psychologist, and thanks to it, has a profound insight into the struggle with one's identity, again putting emphasis on her experience as a psychologist.⁷³ However, when asked how she approached writing about people so different from herself, Albertalli replied with a statement that it was truly a challenging experience for her.

As reported by Kamal, the author does not believe that her experiences as a psychologist qualify her to write from a point of view of someone of different gender or sexuality. Moreover, she did not want to approach the book from a clinical perspective in any way.⁷⁴ This shows that Albertalli is aware of the importance of authentic representation, especially when it comes to writing about underrepresented and marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. She claimed that she researched, listened and solicited feedback from gay readers. Furthermore, as mentioned by Kamal, the author said that she finds it helpful to remember the importance of approaching issues connected with diversity intentionally.⁷⁵ Although she made such claims, there were still people who had objections, arguing she used LGBTQ+ related topics for her own profit. Some people even boycotted the movie adaptation of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* entirely because Albertalli presented herself as a straight woman at the time.

Albertalli came out as bisexual in August 2020. She wrote an article on her sexuality and how she came to terms with it. As mentioned in the article, she used to hate questions about her inspirations for writing such a book, and most importantly why Simon was gay. She would explain she worked for ten years with children who were a part of the LGBTQ+ community and how it inspired her to write a queer young adult novel.⁷⁶ She merely did not realize she might be of a different sexuality than straight. She proceeds to talk about having liking both boys and girls for most of her life without realising that having feelings towards the same gender as hers could be called crushes. It simply did not occur to her that such feelings could be classified as attraction. This, in fact, happens quite often.

Many people who come to terms with their sexuality, especially if it happens later in their lives, talk about finding out they might not be straight and being able to identify their tendencies to befriend someone of the same gender as not always of a platonic nature. They describe how

⁷² Soniah Kamal, "Q&A: Atlantan Becky Albertalli on Portraying Travails of Gay Teen in "Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda," *ARTS ATL*, April 6, 2015.

⁷³ WHSmith Blog, "Young Adults Struggling with Identity."

⁷⁴ Kamal, "Portraying Travails of Gay Teen."

⁷⁵ Kamal, "Portraying Travails of Gay Teen."

⁷⁶ Becky Albertalli, "I Know I'm Late," *Medium*, August 31, 2020.

they would, every so often, find a person of the same gender cool or cute, being drawn to them, without knowing they were actually attracted to the person. This is one of the reasons why the LGBTQ+ representation is so important because if these people who did not realise they might be bisexual or of another sexuality really, saw characters like them in the books and the films, they might have had realised much sooner that it is a possibility to like two genders and more.

Returning to the article, Albertalli mentions she did not have a frame of reference for figuring out her sexuality, claiming that growing up in the eighties and nineties in a conservative southern US suburb, she did not meet many people who were openly gay or lesbian, let alone someone who would identify as a bisexual.⁷⁷ This further supports the concept of figuring out your sexual preferences later in life. Again, it is also a good example why representation matters, especially in young adult literature. When a young reader picks up a book with all kinds of different characters, LGBTQ+ included, they might find themselves in one of them, more so if the main character is not a white cis straight man. In other words, the book can help someone realise and come to terms with their sexuality a lot sooner than they might have done without coming across such a story. Even if the reader does not know anyone who would identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community in real life, they are guided in a safe environment of fiction. Alternatively, the reader might already know they identify as queer, however, they might feel lonely in their experience, and the book might support them in their journey. Seeing oneself being represented in any type of media can be a very liberating feeling.

One could also view Albertalli's article as a response to people criticizing her for identifying as a straight person, while writing books with LGBTQ+ themes and profiting off of them, without having go through the same struggles as queer people do. In the article, she talks about her experience with having her book being made into a movie and the public's reaction to it. Not everybody cared that *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* was written by a seemingly straight woman, however, it did cause quite a bit of discourse about her identity, especially in many online spaces.⁷⁸ As mentioned before, people went as far as boycotting the movie entirely because of her sexuality.

About a month after the film had been released, Albertalli published her third novel and a direct sequel to *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, and the discourse began all over again. People argued that a straight woman simply should not write about a bisexual girl, claiming Albertalli cannot possibly know enough about the topic and experiences a bisexual person goes

⁷⁷ Albertalli, "I Know I'm Late."

⁷⁸ Albertalli, "I Know I'm Late."

through to portray it authentically in the story. Everybody discussing her sexuality and her rights to write such stories was, evidently, at least one of the reasons why she came out in the end. She states in her article that she just felt exhausted by constant scrutiny. Moreover, she mentions that it was not how she wanted to come out. It did not feel empowering or even particularly safe.⁷⁹ It is clear that the biggest push to write the article was the way she has been scrutinised, mocked, lectured, and invalidated for years. In addition, she urges any reader of her article to think about the fact that she definitely is not the only closeted or semi-closeted queer author and the pressure that is created towards the authors nowadays might be unreasonable.⁸⁰

One of the most important points Albertalli made in the article was that labels can change. She mentions that it is okay if one is not out. Everybody should be able to come out on their own terms when they are ready to do so.⁸¹ Moreover, some people might not fully understand their sexuality and gender as of yet and, therefore, should not be forced to put a label onto themselves. There truly is no time or age limit, no one right way to be queer. As stated by Finefrock, the novel's insights into what closeted individuals go through deepens now that there is an understanding that Albertalli's personal experience is in between the lines.⁸²

It is truly an interesting topic—there is a clear difference between how many people who identify as queer approach and receive a queer book written by an author who identifies themselves as straight and an author who is a part of the LGBTQ+ community. Albertalli's coming out years after writing her first LGBTQ+ book changes one's perspective for sure.

Nevertheless, the question still prevails—can somebody who is not a part of the LGBTQ+ community write queer literature? On one hand, people, especially those who identify themselves as queer, claim that straight authors should not participate in writing of queer stories. As illustrated by Alim Kheraj, there is a trend of outside voices that can be viewed, in gay YA author Lev Rosen's opinion, as coming with good intentions, however, when one writes, their first audience is always themselves. Therefore, when a straight person tells a queer story, they are almost always targeting straight audience through the so-called straight gaze, even if unintentionally.⁸³ This might make a large number of people uncomfortable if it is too obvious that the story was not written by an insider. As argued by Kheraj, it might feel like

⁷⁹ Albertalli, "I Know I'm Late."

⁸⁰ Albertalli, "I Know I'm Late."

⁸¹ Albertalli, "I Know I'm Late."

⁸² Finefrock, "'Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda' by Becky Albertalli."

⁸³ Alim Kheraj, "Does It Matter Who Writes Queer Stories?", *i-D*, May 18, 2018.

straight audience comes first before the queer identifying people.⁸⁴ It sends a message that the stories are mostly for straight people and then there might and might not be a space and opportunity for LGBTQ+ community to express themselves.

Directly corresponding with the previous point, there is a problem of straight white women writing for other straight white women. According to Claire Rudy Foster, the vast majority of gay romances are written by straight identifying women.⁸⁵ There might be multiple causes behind it, one of them being historic reasoning behind the number of cis and straight female authors publishing gay stories. In the words of Kheraj, in fanfiction communities dating back to the 1970s, the predominant authors of slash fiction (a story in which two, usually male, characters are in a romantic or sexual relationship) were women. This might be because they can express themselves freely, in both sexual and emotional way.⁸⁶ In a way, young adult literature is rather similar, romance usually plays a significant role which means that the number of female authors is also quite high. The problem arises when LGBTQ+ characters get fetishized. As stated by Foster, in some stories, the truth of the man's queerness is erased because the character is gay only in the ways the straight female author can imagine.⁸⁷ In other words, the characters' sexuality is filtered through a heterosexual's lens.

Another point that has been made against straight authors writing queer stories is linked with authenticity and stereotypes. As mentioned by Claire Rooney and EP Presnell, authors should approach their stories with a viewpoint that they relate to which should help them create a story that is genuine.⁸⁸ Authenticity is a truly important aspect of any story no matter who stands behind it. If it does not seem sincere and natural, it can create a rift between the story and the reader. In addition, when people are not in touch with the LGBTQ+ community, there is a high probability that they might unintentionally use some stereotypes, one of the most common examples being the gay best friend who is "one of the girls". According to Rooney and EP Presnell, when writers do not interact with queer people and their culture, they only come across stereotypes and because of it they end up writing about things that queer people do not necessarily want to read about.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Kheraj, "Does It Matter?"

⁸⁵ Claire Rudy Foster, "Why Are So Many Gay Romance Novels Written By Straight Women?", *Electric Lit*, March 20, 2018.

⁸⁶ Kheraj, "Does It Matter?"

⁸⁷ Claire Rudy Foster, "Gay Novels Written By Straight Women."

⁸⁸ Claire Rooney and EP Presnell, "Opinion: By and For the Gays," *On the Record*, September 18, 2019.

⁸⁹ Rooney and EP Presnell, "By and For the Gays."

On the other hand, people argue that one does not have to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community to write queer-themed stories. They say that even though the authors themselves are not a part of the community, they can still create a good story with a healthy representation of the queer characters and, subsequently, queer culture. As stated by Gena Hymowech, writing about a different sexual orientation does not have to be difficult. In the article she talks about a young adult author Ellen Wittlinger who made a point of being able to write about a male character, a character who is African-American or someone who believes in God even though she herself is not, in fact, religious.⁹⁰ If the author is skilled in their profession and is able to be empathetic towards their characters, it does not have to be an issue that they are of a different sexual orientation. Moreover, if the author feels like they might have problems with writing some of the characters, they can always reach out and consult someone who identifies as such. Furthermore, thinking about the issue who should be allowed to write queer stories and who should not, could almost feel absurd because when one thinks about it, in a way, the authors could only write about themselves and things they directly experience if every aspect of one's life and identity was looked at way the sexuality and gender identity is sometimes looked at.

This topic is an extremely interesting one and it is truly difficult to determine who is in the right and who is in the wrong because, after all, this matter is not black and white and there are many aspects to it. It should be up to everyone, no matter what their sexuality is, to form their own opinion based on their reading experience.

⁹⁰ Gena Hymowech, "Can Straight Authors Write Queer Too?", *Lambda Literary*, May 24, 2010.

6. Young Adult Literature

Young Adult literature, also known as YA literature, is a genre that emerged in the 20th century when teenagers became a powerful force of economy in the 1930s and gained prominence in the 1960s. As explained on the Southern Connecticut State University website, the term young adult literature is inherently amorphous because its components “young adult” and “literature” are dynamic.⁹¹ This means that when culture and society, which are sources of the context for YA literature, change, it changes too.

The genre was once dismissed as consisting of not much more than problem novels and romances, but since the 1990s it has been viewed as literature that welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation and risk-taking. However, although it had not been praised in the past, according to Alice Trupe, the genre of YA literature has thrived since the 1960s.⁹² The critical recognition and scholarly interest in the field was a little behind the inventiveness of the authors. It should be mentioned that today, YA literature encompasses complex plotting and more moral ambiguity than the literature for teens did before the 1960s. As Trupe points out, young readers do not have to be naive readers anymore.⁹³ What is basically said is that YA literature went through a massive development. Nowadays, it is very much a complex genre with a large number of stories to choose from.

As stated by Michael Rebuyas at the beginning of 2021, that just by looking at any bookstore’s shelves, it is obvious that contemporary Young Adult literature is experiencing a resurgence of sorts. He goes as far as saying that “we are living in the golden age of YA.”⁹⁴ Since YA literature is among the most widely-read of genres in literature, it can definitely be said that it has come a long way from the past. The number of YA titles jumped from 4,668 in 2002 to 10,276 in 2012. Moreover, according to Rebuyas, the books that explore plots and protagonists so far removed from its conservative and predominantly White origins have also become much more prominent in the 21st century.⁹⁵

One of those sub-genres is most definitely the queer YA literature and since Becky Albertalli is a YA author who mostly writes about the LGBTQ+ topic, it is important to introduce the topic of queer YA literature too.

⁹¹ “What is Young Adult Literature?” Southern Connecticut State University, last modified March 15, 2022, <https://libguides.southernct.edu/youngadulthoodliterature>.

⁹² Alice Trupe, *Thematic Guide To YA Literature* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), VII.

⁹³ Trupe, *Thematic Guide*, VII.

⁹⁴ Michael Rebuyas, “On meet-cutes and cosmic intervention: An interview with Becky Albertalli and Adam Silvera,” *Medium*, January 13, 2021.

⁹⁵ Rebuyas, “On meet-cutes and cosmic intervention.”

As stated by Trupe, changing demographics in the United States, as well as increased interaction with dramatically different cultures from all corners of the world, promote understanding and tolerance among people.⁹⁶ And as it was mentioned before, YA literature can serve as a sort of a mirror to today's world and society. In other words, YA literature is an important lens through which to examine cultural shifts. According to Michael Waters, because YA books are geared toward up-and-coming generations, what is changing in YA reflects what is changing in the world.⁹⁷ This, of course, includes the treatment of queer people.

This being said, topics that touch upon different ethnicities, religions, languages or different sexualities and gender identities are quite common in YA literature which means young people are exposed to such topics, helping them to be more open-minded and tolerant towards minorities, the LGBTQ+ community included. However, it should be pointed out that prejudices still persist and even though it is fairly safe to be openly a part of the LGBTQ+ community in most of the states, there are still regions where people are not as open-minded than in others and the prejudice, occasionally turning into hate crimes, unfortunately still prevails.

As it was mentioned before, YA literature started as an independent genre in the first half of the 20th century, but now it is time to look specifically at the history of the queer YA literature. The first queer Young Adult book was published in 1969, however, an LGBTQ+ themed book that basically started the genre of lesbian pulp fiction was released in 1952. The novel *Spring Fire* is not classified as a work of YA fiction, nevertheless, its circumstances, such as a tragic ending or the publisher's underestimation of a queer readership, bear similarities of many early LGBTQ+ themed novels. According to Waters, the book became an instant sensation and sold over 1.5 million copies.⁹⁸ Its author was shocked when she received numbers of letters about the book from queer women. Apparently, the book was not aimed at any lesbian market simply because there was not any that she would know about.

As for the plot of the book, it is about a college freshman who falls in love with her sorority sister, but it ends the way the most early portrayals of LGBTQ+ people did, tragically. The author never liked the ending but according to her publisher it was a necessary precaution for the book to be sent through mail. If the homosexuality had been portrayed in a positive way, the novel would have been deemed obscene and post offices would have confiscated it. This is a perfect example of a tragic ending which was so common in early queer literature.

⁹⁶ Trupe, *Thematic Guide*, 9.

⁹⁷ Michael Waters, "A Brief History Of Queer Young Adult Literature," *The Establishment*, August 3, 2016.

⁹⁸ Waters, "Queer Young Adult Literature."

Since then, the LGBTQ+ community has come a long way and it is perfectly legal to be out and proud with all fifty states permitting same-sex marriage. As described by Waters, in the same time period, the amount of YA books featuring queer characters has grown from roughly one per year in the 1970s to upwards of fifty per year recently.⁹⁹ What is more, a positive portrayal of same-gender love has become more and more mainstream, replacing the queer stories with tragic endings.

Going back to the beginnings of queer YA literature, as stated by Derritt Mason, in 1976, Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham posed the question whether young gays can find happiness in YA books.¹⁰⁰ They wrote an essay on the first four American YA novels featuring LGBTQ+ themes and even though they celebrated homosexuality's newfound presence in YA, they also realized that eight primary characters in these novels contended with five pairs of divorced parents, four deaths, and four car accidents which resulted in a few injuries and five fatalities. This clearly illustrates what has already been pointed out, that YA novels used to predominantly end up in a tragedy. According to Mason, Hanckel and Cunningham rightly claimed that it is crucial to combine authentic experiences of gay youth with a hope that is life-affirming.¹⁰¹ This should help the young LGBTQ+ readers see that despite some struggles, queer people can live a happy life.

Nowadays, it is not difficult to find such books at all, one of those being Becky Albertalli's books. As stated by Waters, LGBTQ+ YA is becoming more varied and after decades of book banning and fears about sales, it is finally beginning to reflect the world today's teens live in.¹⁰² As to put Albertalli's work into perspective, namely *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, there are many books similar to hers, for example *Red, White and Royal Blue*. Although it came out a few years later and the settings are rather different, it is fairly similar, especially considering the topic of coming out. In both novels, the main protagonists are quite comfortable with their sexuality but the thought of coming out to their surroundings brings all of them anxiety. Nevertheless, both of the stories end with a happy-ending. As it was said, there is a large number of LGBTQ+ themed books and their range is getting bigger as well. A lot of them are set in a contemporary world but there are also those that are set in fantasy or mythical worlds, for example *The Song of Achilles*. And although some of them end tragically, the majority is written in a positive way and the ending is far from tragic.

⁹⁹ Waters, "Queer Young Adult Literature."

¹⁰⁰ Derritt Mason, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 2.

¹⁰¹ Mason, *Queer Anxieties*, 2.

¹⁰² Waters, "Queer Young Adult Literature."

7. Introduction to the books

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda is a young adult novel and Becky Albertalli's debut book. It is a coming-of-age, coming out story whose protagonist is a sixteen-year-old Simon who is in his junior year of high school. He is a closeted gay kid who is somewhat forced to come out after his secret gets out towards the end of the book. Right from the beginning he is blackmailed by one of his classmates who found his email correspondence with Blue – his online friend whose identity he does not know except for the fact that he goes to the same high school. They get to know each other and slowly fall in love without actually uncovering their identity at first. After the fact that Simon is gay gets out, he is forced to step outside his comfort zone without alienating his friends, compromising himself or losing a chance to be happy with Blue in the end.

What is positive is that this book was made into a movie in 2018 which means it had an opportunity to reach more LGBTQ+ identifying people and influence them and their lives for the better. The movie was met with overall positive response, most critics claiming that it is a sweet, touching and modern romantic comedy. The film being this successful might help more people to get to read not only the book it is based on but also other works by Albertalli, namely *Leah on the Offbeat* which is the sequel to *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*.

Leah on the Offbeat focuses on one of the closest friends of Simon's, Leah Burke, and the plot of this book takes place in their senior year. She is a drummer in a girl-band but when it comes to real life she is not always on the beat, hence the title of the book. She feels like she is an anomaly in the group of her friends because she is the only child of a young, single mother, and her life is less privileged than the others'. She is passionate about her drawing but too self-conscious to show her art to anybody. She knows she is bisexual and even told her mother who is supportive of her, however, she did not tell anyone else because she cannot find the courage to tell her friends – not even Simon even though he is openly gay at this point. With prom and college drawing closer her friend group starts to fall apart unexpectedly and Leah does not know what to do when people who are closest to her start fighting. Moreover, she realises she might love one of them more than she ever intended which does not help with her overall struggles.

It is clear that *Leah on the Offbeat* is in many ways similar to *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, however, there are new themes explored, namely Leah identifying as a bisexual woman. With bisexuality, there comes a problem from both straight people and those

who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ because bisexual people are often told that they are either not really gay and it is a phase they will grow out of or, on the other hand, that being bisexual is only a step to identifying as gay or lesbian. This might come off as hurtful to many people who fall under the term and it is a positive thing when bisexuality is portrayed in stories such as Leah's.

The third book discussed in this thesis is called *What If It's Us* and it is a collaboration between Albertalli and her friend and colleague, Adam Silvera. The book is written from two different perspectives of the protagonist of the book, Arthur and Ben, in alternating chapters. While Arthur's parts are written by Albertalli, Ben's are by Silvera. The whole story is set in New York. Arthur is in the city only for the summer accompanying his mother by being an apprentice in her company. Ben goes to summer school and thinks that the universe needs to mind its own business as he meets Arthur at a very vulnerable moment while mailing his ex-boyfriend's things back to him. Before they can get to know each other, they are separated by a flash mob and they lose each other with no means of contact. They start to look for the other and manage to do so after a brief time of struggling. While the book focuses on their relationship, the reader also gets to know their families, closest friends, and in Arthur's case also his colleagues. They keep having do-over first dates because they want their official first date to live up to the story of how they managed to find each other even though they had thought it would not be possible. When the end of summer hovers over them, Arthur has to go back to his home in Atlanta, Georgia and Ben has an important exam that will determine if he will have to repeat his junior year of high school or if he will continue on with his classmates. They come to a conclusion that it would be too difficult to maintain a long-distance relationship and eventually agree to stay friends which is shown to work rather well in the epilogue when they chat over facetime fifteen months later.

This book is different from the previous two when it comes to the topic of coming out. While *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and *Leah on the Offbeat* both deal with a closeted main character who has to come out at some point of the story, in this story both of the protagonists are already out to their friends and family and their coming out is only mentioned when they think about it briefly. Rather than putting a spotlight on their coming out, the book mostly focuses on their relationship. Furthermore, this story might be seen as more realistic than Albertalli's solo work since it portrays the relationship between Arthur and Ben as far from ideal with a brief break-up that occurs towards the end of the book. The ending is also much more realistic since Albertalli's books have a happy ending and this collaborative book is more on the bittersweet spectrum.

Looking at all three stories, they are obviously quite similar, however, there are still aspects of each book that are different from the others. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* falls under the most common category which is a story about a gay male. This being said it does not mean it is something that should be frowned upon, it is still an essential part of the LGBTQ+ themed literature and its importance should not be overlooked. Since it is one of the more famous books, it can function as one's first out of many LGBTQ+ books they read.

When it comes to *Leah on the Offbeat*, the emphasis is put on bisexuality unlike in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. As discussed in The Publishing Post article, The Importance of LGBTQ+ Diversity in Literature, before the LGBTQ+ stories were available in the mainstream, it was hard to find queer stories that focused on identities other than gay.¹⁰³ Therefore, the decision of Albertalli to move from the story of Simon to explore Leah's bisexuality can be seen as a very positive move. As mentioned in the article, it is important to keep in mind that representation of one queer identity is not representation of all queer identities.¹⁰⁴

Moving onto *What If It's Us*, the most common storyline that makes up the majority of LGBTQ+ themed stories is the one of teenagers or young adults who struggle with their identity. As illustrated in The Publishing Post article, this is a common issue that many people within the LGBTQ+ community experience, however, it can get quite repetitive.¹⁰⁵ This story might be about two gay males, which is a little bit stereotypical, but it does not really focus on their struggles with their identity since they seem rather comfortable with the fact that they are gay or, at least, it is not really discussed in any way during the story. The book focuses on their relationship with each other and with the people around them instead. As said in the article, there is a chance that the stories that are told have the ability to change history and influence mindset of generations, therefore, these types of stories need to be normalised if people want to live in a society where coming out stories are no longer a big deal and people just accept others with different sexualities with ease.¹⁰⁶ This can be achieved with stories like *What If It's Us*. Both main characters are gay and it is commonly accepted by their family and friends, there is no big coming out or anything similar to it.

Before moving onto the coming out topic in the first book, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, it should be mentioned that all three books are written in the 1st person point of view

¹⁰³ "The Importance of LGBTQ+ Diversity in Literature," The Publishing Post, accessed February 9, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ "The Importance of LGBTQ+ Diversity."

¹⁰⁵ "The Importance of LGBTQ+ Diversity."

¹⁰⁶ "The Importance of LGBTQ+ Diversity."

which might make it feel more authentic and easier for the readers to engage with, and see themselves in the characters. Moreover, as mentioned in The Publishing Post article, many LGBTQ+ readers can remember the first book which represented their sexuality as a turning point in their lives where heteronormative standards are held.¹⁰⁷ Stories that show more LGBTQ+ identities and do not only focus on struggles with them, can be quite essential in the lives of LGBTQ+ people.

¹⁰⁷ “The Importance of LGBTQ+ Diversity.”

8. Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda

It is quite evident right from the beginning of the book that the topic of coming out is an essential part of the story that accompanies the main character Simon throughout the whole book. Right on the second page, Simon finds himself in the situation when he is confronted with the fact that he is gay. One of his classmates, Martin, found out through his email that Simon is not straight and says to him that it is pretty obvious that he does not want people to know that about him, which Simon immediately ponders upon.

As it is described in the book, he thinks about coming out and how it does not scare him. However, he adds that he only thinks it does not scare him.¹⁰⁸ This shows that he might be comfortable with his identity within himself but when it comes to his surroundings, he is not quite sure how everyone would react to him coming out so he keeps it a secret because he does not have any reason to come out to them. This is rather common for people who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community. They do not feel a need to come out to their friends and/or family as it could unnecessarily compromise them. This is also a good example of portrayed struggles in the LGBTQ+ themed books. Although it is written in a mostly positive way and there is a happy ending for Simon and his love interest, there are still things that bring him anxiety, namely the problem of coming out.

Following this thought, many young people may feel pressured to come out or might think it is okay to come out in their real life since they usually find friends or even a community online where everyone is okay with various sexualities and genders but in many cases the reality is not as ideal as the online world. They are often advised by older members of the LGBTQ+ group to take their time and seeing Simon be hesitant about coming out might help them understand that they do not have to come out immediately after they realise they are not straight but that it is okay to take their time. This being said, everyone's life is, of course, very different and there is also a large difference between coming out to one's friends and one's family, especially if they are underaged. If the friends are not supportive, one can live with it but if the family does not support them, emotionally as well as financially in some cases, it can result in them becoming homeless which can have traumatising effects on them in the long run. This complies to the idea that some regions might not be as supportive and open-minded towards people who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community. However, Simon's coming out is overall quite successful, be it him coming out to his friends or to his family too.

¹⁰⁸ Becky Albertalli, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (New York: Balzer + Bray, 2015), 2.

Another mention of coming out is on the next page when Simon's conversation with Martin continues. As illustrated in the book, Martin says that he thinks people would be cool about it and Simon should be who he is.¹⁰⁹ This only reinforces the fact that people might feel obliged to a certain degree to disclose their sexuality. Despite Martin saying that, Simon stands his ground, thinking that it is the last thing he needs. As said in the book, he thinks that he does not really need "some straight kid who barely knows [him], advising [him] on coming out."¹¹⁰ This shows that straight people should not have a say in topics such as coming out because they do not have any experience with it since being heterosexual is seen as a norm and they do not have to go through the process of telling people about their sexuality.

What is important is Simon's anonymous conversation with Blue via emails. They talk about quite a range of topics, one of them being coming out. Having someone in his life who Simon can openly talk to about LGBTQ+ topics freely seems to help him come out of his shell a little bit. Blue talks about wanting to come out to his parents and discusses it with Simon, claiming that he feels an urge to put it out there lately. As illustrated in the book, he says that he has still not decided whether to go through with it, that it is something he did not think he would be ready to do anytime soon.¹¹¹ He does not come out to his father at first but with Simon's support he manages to come out to his mother.

Simultaneously, Simon decides to come out to one of his friends, being inspired by Blue. He keeps thinking about Blue's coming out on his way home one evening. He is alone in his car with his friend Abby and somewhat spontaneously decides to come out to her even if he did not plan to do so. As described in the book, he starts with saying that she cannot tell anyone and when she stays quiet he musters up the courage and tells her he is gay.¹¹² This is a huge step for Simon because it is the first time he admitted it aloud. Before that he only talked about it with Blue in the emails. Abby reacts in an amazing way. She wonders if it is the first time Simon told anyone and when it is confirmed it is, she tells Simon that she is honoured and that she loves him. Moreover, as shown in the book, she shows her support by asking him what he is going to do now. If he is going to tell people or not.¹¹³ Since he did not really think about it thoroughly, Simon admits that he does not know and he will eventually. The whole conversation ends with Abby telling him she loves him and then they go home.

¹⁰⁹ Albertalli, *Simon*, 3.

¹¹⁰ Albertalli, *Simon*, 3.

¹¹¹ Albertalli, *Simon*, 106.

¹¹² Albertalli, *Simon*, 124.

¹¹³ Albertalli, *Simon*, 125.

After this experience, Simon talks with Blue again who admits he did come out to his mother. As shown in the book, he thinks she took it well and was pretty calm about the whole thing.¹¹⁴ This can have a positive effect on LGBTQ+ readers because they see someone, who is similar to them, conquering their fears and coming out to someone in their real life (not online) and it can influence them to find the courage to do the same thing, whether it is coming out to their family or just their friends. It is, of course, important how they feel about their situation and if they can be certain that it is safe to come out. If they are not in a safe place to do so, reading about it can be a way of escapism for them. Even though they might not be able to come out at the very moment they are reading a book in which they are shown that it can be alright eventually and there is a world where it is possible. In other words, it gives them hope if nothing else. This shows that moving from the “bury your gays” trope to having a positive representation of someone who is like them helps them to see that they are not alone and there are people who are like them.

After coming out to Abby, Simon wants to tell his two other friends, Leah and Nick, too but he is very scared to do so. It is explained on pages 133 and 134, even though he felt like he knew Abby forever, the truth is that they met only a few months ago. It is different with Leah and Nick because Simon has known Leah since sixth grade and Nick since they were four.¹¹⁵ There is this additional pressure of possibly losing lifelong friends because of his coming out. From the way he talks about them it is unlikely but the pressure is still there. Simon does not know how to tell them something that means so much to him without changing their whole dynamics.

This issue is also discussed towards the end of the book. There is a conversation between Simon and Leah after he comes out to practically everybody. She wonders if Simon trusts Abby more since he told her first and feels offended because of this fact. As mentioned in the book, Simon admits that it was easier to tell Abby but it was not because he trusted her more but because he did not have the kind of history with her that he had with Leah and Nick.¹¹⁶ Paradoxically, it was easier to come out to someone who he was not as close to as to Leah and Nick. Undoubtedly, many LGBTQ+ identifying people can see themselves in this. It is easier to imagine coming out to a stranger and them not accepting them than to one’s closest friends with a possibility – even though it may be very low, the possibility is still there – of them not

¹¹⁴ Albertalli, *Simon*, 126.

¹¹⁵ Albertalli, *Simon*, 133.

¹¹⁶ Albertalli, *Simon*, 284.

accepting them and turning their backs on them. Thankfully, Leah understands Simon's concerns and they remain friends.

Moving onto Simon's coming out to his family, it was a little bit different because of the circumstances he was in. The first family member he comes out to is his younger sister Nora. She comes up to his room to tell him someone wrote about him online, claiming he is gay on a website basically everybody from his school knows about. As described in the book, he panics at first but eventually admits to his sister that it is true and he is, in fact, gay.¹¹⁷ Fortunately, Nora's reaction is a positive one. She even says that she figured it out by the way he reacted to the post online and assures him that she already reported it and it should be taken down. After that, they discuss whether he wants to tell the rest of the family.

He decides to go through with it. The reason behind it might be the fact that a lot of people from his surroundings know now and he can take this as an opportunity to be openly gay, even though he might have not been ready for this step before. Moreover, even if his family did react negatively, he would have people who already support him and would eventually help him out. As mentioned before in the story, Simon knows deep down that his family should be fine with him being gay. He claims they are not religious and are democrats, which is his reasoning why it should be alright. However, he also thinks that it would definitely be very awkward.¹¹⁸ This proves to be a right prediction in the end. However, there is one thing he did not think about before and that is Nora already knowing about his sexuality. She is kind of an insider who is there to silently support him. Simon starts by saying that he needs to tell them something. They proceed to joke about him being pregnant, but he quickly tells them the truth about him being gay. Everyone reacts in their own way which does not surprise Simon at all:

I mean, I guess it's about what I expected. My mom's asking me about my feelings, Dad's turning it into a joke, Alice is getting political, and Nora is keeping her mouth shut. You could say there's a kind of comfort in predictability, and my family is pretty goddamn predictable. But I'm so exhausted and unhappy right now. I thought it would feel like a weight had been lifted. But it's just like everything else this week. Strange and off-kilter and surreal.¹¹⁹

Even though his family takes the news rather well, Simon is not overall happy with it. He expected that something monumental would happen, a weight being lifted from his shoulders. It is unclear why he had such high expectations, it might be the fact that he imagined

¹¹⁷ Albertalli, *Simon*, 159.

¹¹⁸ Albertalli, *Simon*, 55.

¹¹⁹ Albertalli, *Simon*, 164.

it so many times that this reaction seems a bit anticlimactic in comparison to his imagination. This might have both positive and negative effects on LGBTQ+ readers. It shows them that their family or friends might not react in this amazing, super positive way which might be discouraging in a way, but on the other hand, it proves that the coming out does not have to be a big occasion and if they are in a safe environment, it can be a quiet affair with everything being fine in the end. This being said, he did manage to come out and does not have to worry about it anymore, even though he might feel a little bit disheartened.

After coming out to his family, there are only two more people he needs to be worried about – Leah and Nick because they are the last people he tells. Since they are one of his closest friends and probably saw the post about him, he wants to tell them in person. Because he tells them not to make a big deal out of it, it goes smoothly, with him and Nick even joking about holding hands. The only problem was with Leah who felt like Simon did not trust her enough to tell her as one of the first people, however, as mentioned before, they do talk about it at the end of the book and everything is quite alright between them. This must be very reassuring for the LGBTQ+ identifying people too, since they are shown that though there can be problems and coming out does not always go smoothly, there is a way to talk about one's problems and find a way to settle things down.

What is also discussed in the book when it comes to the topic of coming out is religion. As mentioned before, Simon touches upon his family not being religious, however, this is not the case with his online friend, Blue. The religion is mentioned probably because the story takes place in the USA and it is known that the religion plays a big role in everyday life. Unfortunately, many people hide behind it to claim LGBTQ+ community should not be tolerated, that is probably why it is touched upon in the book.

As described in the book, Blue tells Simon that it can get complicated when one brings religion into the equation. He ponders upon the fact that, technically Jews and Episcopalians (his parents' religions) should be gay-friendly, however, it is hard to really know what applies to one's own parents.¹²⁰ This is a very real issue because even though one's religion can play a big role on how they approach the LGBTQ+, it very much also depends on the individual. It is not only about whether they are religious or not but what they are like, how they were brought up, etc. These factors also influence the way they see the world in general. As Blue delivers it, there are gay children with very religious parents who end up being really supportive and going to Pride Parades with them but there is also the other side of the coin, those parents who might

¹²⁰ Albertalli, *Simon*, 106.

be totally fine with homosexuality until it is their own kid who comes out.¹²¹ This issue can be very real too. There are people who might claim that they are fine with homosexuality until it is their reality. It might seem strange to someone but people like this, unfortunately, do exist. They claim that being gay is fine but then there is the but- at the end of this statement.

In Blue's case it was alright in the end as he says his mother was quite calm about it and did not even bring Jesus into it at all which is probably something he was worried about since he is mentioning it in the first place.

What should also be mentioned is the fact that the story takes place in Atlanta, Georgia. Georgia is a state that does belong to the South of the United States and as it is commonly known, because of various reasons, there is still prejudice towards minorities, among which is the LGBTQ+ community. However, it is a common stereotype that anywhere in the South people are intolerant of diversity and when Albertalli was asked whether it is true or a misconception and how it impacts her stories, she answered with words that it is a complicated question and there is no simple answer.

In the interview with Alec Frazier, she says that there are many communities down in the States where one can see a lot of blatant intolerance and discrimination, nevertheless, Georgia has a lot of rich cultural diversity, and Atlanta in particular is known for being progressive.¹²² She suggests that it can be a challenge to tackle such dynamic in her stories, but even though readers might expect Simon's family to react badly and not accept his sexuality, it is based on a very broad stereotype and his family experience tracks closely with many families in Albertalli's personal community. According to Frazier, Albertalli says that her job as a writer is not necessarily to engage with readers' perceptions of the South, she wants to remain true to the characters and families she writes about, imbedded within the community in which she has lived her whole life.¹²³ All of this indicates that it truly depends on the individual people and families, rather than the area they live in, even though the region might play the role in one's open-mindedness. As it will be shown later on, in the chapter about *What If It's Us*, even in progressive areas such as New York, one can be met with blatant intolerance and homophobia.

As it was mentioned, everybody who is important to Simon reacts to his coming out really well and are not prejudicial at all, nevertheless, the general heteronormativity still exists

¹²¹ Albertalli, *Simon*, 106.

¹²² Alec Frazier, "Exclusive Interview – Becky Albertalli, author of *Yes No Maybe So* and *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*," *Flickering Myth*, April 18, 2020.

¹²³ Frazier, "Exclusive Interview – Becky Albertalli."

in his world and there is one part of the book that is quoted the most among few others. In chapter 18, Simon is talking to Blue via email and brings up the thought that everyone should have to come out, even if they are heterosexual. He says “Why is straight the default? Everyone should have to declare one way or another, whether you’re straight, gay, bi or whatever.”¹²⁴ This resonates with many people as it is shown in the comment section on Goodreads. Many people are saying it is their favourite part together with Simon complaining that both white and being straight should not be the default. This shows how heteronormative the world around him is and how he wishes it would not be this way which makes perfect sense because then those who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community would not have to go through so much trouble. It would simply be normal for everyone to state their sexuality at some point in their lives whether they would be straight or not. This is also shown in the film adaptation from 2018. In one scene there are people coming out as straight and their parents reacting in shock which obviously hints to Simon’s thoughts in the book when he speaks out about coming out and being straight as the default.

As for the comments on the book in general, there are obviously mixed reactions, however, many of them are very positive. For instance, a username Chai states that *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* was the very first LGBTQ+ book that they have ever read.¹²⁵ They describe how moved they were by the book and that they will always associate the story with the genuine feeling of connection. They also mention how comforted they felt when they realised the LGBTQ+ experiences were universal and that there is a community they belong into. This only proves how important it is to have books on this topic. Reading a story that reflects their feelings and reality is simply comforting.

¹²⁴ Albertalli, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, 146.

¹²⁵ “Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda,” Goodreads, accessed June 8, 2022.

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/19547856-simon-vs-the-homo-sapiens-agenda>

9. Leah on the Offbeat

When it comes to *Leah on the Offbeat*, it is fair to say that the book is very similar to *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. As it was already mentioned, it is a continuation of the previous book, although it skips to the end of the school year when everybody is trying to decide to which university they want to go to in the future and it also puts an emphasis on their prom, which plays quite an important role too. It should probably be said that this pressure of choosing university while trying to come to terms with who she fancies and thinking of coming out is very daunting for Leah but she manages to get through this difficult time period and does so rather well which surely helps the readers to see themselves in her and see that even though they might be going through a lot of things, it is possible to manage it.

When talking about this book, it is important to highlight the fact that it is, in fact, a book about a woman who identifies as bisexual because there have not been many, especially in the past. As described on the Foreword website, lesbians, and all women who experience same-sex attraction, are historically underrepresented in media when compared to gay men.¹²⁶ There has been some improvement in the last few years, however, gay men relationships still very much make up the majority of queer stories in popular literature. Seeing this, it is good that Albertalli decided to explore Leah's sexuality and dedicated her her own book.

Although the book mostly focuses on Leah's sexuality and relationships, it discusses Simon's sexuality, especially at the beginning, as well. Right in the beginning, Leah talks about Simon and his relationship with Bram, describing their dynamics, but she also talks about people not being accepting of queer identifying people.¹²⁷ She is clearly hinting at the still-prevailing homophobia that might not be as common as in the past but there are still people who are quite narrowminded and discriminative towards the LGBTQ+ community. Leah also talks about Martin and the way he blackmailed Simon in their junior year which culminated in Martin basically outing Simon to the school.¹²⁸ If one has read *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* before *Leah on the Offbeat*, they would know that Simon was already out to the people that mattered the most to him, however, that does not excuse Martin and his actions. Leah is rightfully angry at him even after a whole year has passed since then. She mentions that she has barely said a word to him since and it was similar with Simon's sister and their peers, namely Bram and Abby.

¹²⁶ "The "L" In LGBT, And Why Order Matters."

¹²⁷ Becky Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat* ((New York: Balzer + Bray, 2018), 9.

¹²⁸ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 13.

Leah is very opinionated about anything that concerns people being a part of the LGBTQ+ community, which makes perfect sense since she herself identifies as bisexual. Not only does she refuse talking to someone whose actions negatively impacted her friend, she also dislikes people who think in a very heteronormative way, for example her friend's father. Approximately in the middle of the book, she is talking to Abby when she mentions that her father thinks the college dorms should be gender separated. It is described in the book that he wants them to be separated simply to not have sex.¹²⁹ Leah gets a little angry at the way he thinks because she immediately thinks about gay people and she simply does not understand how someone whose sister is gay (Abby's aunt is a lesbian) cannot see how problematic it is to think this way. The only problem with Leah is the way she never expresses such thoughts to people around her but rather just thinks about it in silence.

When it comes to *Leah on the Offbeat*, there are many things she has to go through and solve, however, when it comes to queer-related topics, there are two main issues. The first one is her coming out. She may be quite comfortable with being bisexual but she is only out to her mother and nobody else. She thinks about coming out to her friends, especially Simon since he is already out and proud, but she is inexplicably scared to do so. Of course, things may turn sour and some people might not accept her but as Leah mentions she simply knows that Simon would be supportive. Nevertheless she never really finds the courage to tell him. The second main issue is Leah starting to have feelings for Abby and trying to navigate through it.

There are two scenes in particular when she thinks about it vigorously. In the first one she is talking to Simon when he expresses his surprise, and joy really, with the number of gay people at a college he wants to attend after they graduate. He says that he keeps imagining what it would be like to have actual friends.¹³⁰ This triggers Leah since she is a part of the LGBTQ+ community but still in the closet. Of course Simon cannot know that and is pretty much oblivious to the fact that Leah is a bisexual, in his eyes she is still a straight girl. This only proves how heteronormative the world is. If a person does not state otherwise it is presumed they are heterosexual. In a way, Leah feels relieved because she does not have to face an uncomfortable situation of her coming out, but she also says that her heart twists in a reaction to Simon talking about wanting gay friends.

In the second scene, only three chapters after the first one, it is again just Leah and Simon alone, now they are in her room. They are lying on her bed talking about having to say

¹²⁹ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 115.

¹³⁰ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 133.

goodbye to each other and their other friends at the end of the school. Prompted by being this honest with each other, Leah suddenly thinks about telling Simon she is bisexual. As described in the book, she states that there has never been a moment in history that was more perfect for coming out.¹³¹ She still does not, even though she is alone with her gay best friend who should be completely supportive. In her words, it is like the words won't come.¹³²

In the end, what helps her with coming out to her friends is simply being in a relationship with another girl. That girl being Abby. When reading the book, one can notice how Leah slowly falls for her friend despite trying to avoid having feelings for her. It happens gradually, in the first book Leah is rather jealous of Abby because she is pretty, funny and popular which Leah is not, at least in her opinion. It seems like she would like to be like her but it all changes in the second book and instead of wanting to be Abby it looks like she wants to be *with* Abby. The problem is that Abby is in a relationship with Nick and presents herself as a straight ally.

Leah thinks about her friend more often gradually throughout the whole book, but even in the beginning it sounds like she might already have feelings towards Abby which are not exactly platonic. For example, when Leah's mother mentions that Abby is adorable and she would like to see her daughter with someone like her, Leah completely refuses to talk about it.¹³³ This way of thinking continues in chapters twelve and thirteen, when Abby threads their fingers right at the lunch table where everyone of their friends can watch. Leah gets annoyed by this because she still thinks her friend is straight and only messing with her.

Leah storms out because she is scared that if she stayed for longer, she would lash out at someone. Afterwards, she proceeds to think about Abby and her actions, stating that she was definitely not flirting with her and it definitely did not affect her.¹³⁴ This seems like she is trying to preserve herself. As many women who identify themselves as LGBTQ+ know, falling in love with a straight woman is never a good thing. There are countless articles about how it happens with tips on how to get over it. For example, in an article on Coming Out Lesbian website, the author states that everyone has at some point fallen for a straight girl and that the reader should not feel bad or ashamed because falling for someone who does not return the feelings simply happens when one is dating.¹³⁵ This is one of the reasons why Leah tries to not

¹³¹ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 145.

¹³² Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 145.

¹³³ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 42.

¹³⁴ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 75.

¹³⁵ "Falling for a Straight Girl," *Coming Out Lesbian*, March 24, 2021, <https://comingoutlesbianpod.com/index.php/2021/03/24/falling-for-a-straight-girl/>.

think about Abby as a potential partner. Since she does not know her sexuality and sees her dating Nick, she just presumes that she is straight which is, by the way, again hinting at the ever-present heteronormativity, just like in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*.

The biggest change in their friendship happens in chapter twenty. Since Leah and Abby go to see their possible choices of universities, they get to spend more time together and become closer friends. While they are visiting one of the universities, they play truth or dare while alone and Abby dares Leah to kiss her. She is doubtful because it would be her first kiss and she still is not sure about Abby's sexuality but in the end, Abby initiates the kiss. The problem occurs right after the kiss, when Abby says "we're pretty good at this for two straight girls."¹³⁶ It is possible that she might be testing the waters, however, Leah takes it very badly and comes out on the spot. Abby does not know how to react to it and apologises for kissing her. Afterwards, they start to talk about their crushes, Abby confesses that she might also like girls which makes Leah very nervous, to say the least. As described in the book, Abby tells Leah that she is pretty and "she wants to be friends or something, I don't know."¹³⁷ Abby's actions clearly indicate that she must be confused by what is happening, still trying to navigate her feelings and come to terms with what her sexuality might be. Moreover, Leah trying to protect herself and her feelings by withdrawing from her certainly does not help.

Although them kissing did cause them arguing, it also helped Leah realise that Abby probably is not straight, at least. She continues to think about Abby quite often, however, she somehow still doubts they could be something more than friends. There are multiple factors why this is so. First one is Abby and her sexuality because she does not want to pursue a romantic relationship with someone who might not feel the same towards her. Second reason why she is reserved is the fact that Abby was recently in a relationship with their mutual friend and she is scared that if she did end up in a relationship with her, she would destroy their whole friend group. Third factor is both quite simple but at the same time complex. She is insecure. There are many reasons why, for example, as it was already mentioned, she feels like an anomaly around her friends because she is the only child with a single mother and she is on a heavier side which also does not add to her confidence.

Abby eventually comes out to Leah as a lowkey bisexual. She starts with saying she does not think she is straight.¹³⁸ This makes Leah hopeful, however, Abby then adds she is lowkey bisexual which makes her friend a little annoyed. As it was described she feels strongly

¹³⁶ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 122.

¹³⁷ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 123.

¹³⁸ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 156.

about the LGBTQ+ topic and she simply does not believe there is something as being lowkey bisexual. One simply is bisexual or not, nothing in between. This is of course problematic. It touches upon the issue of labels. As it is explained on the She website, labels can make people feel empowered and part of the community, but they can also end up being restricting.¹³⁹ Some people choose not to label themselves or just call themselves queer as the umbrella term because it feels more natural and comfortable to them. And yes, Abby eventually comes out as a bisexual, but that does not mean Leah has any right to tell her whether she feels lowkey bisexual or just bisexual. Sexuality is very individual and varies from person to person and when one starts to assume other's sexual orientation, it never ends up well to any party.

The girls eventually talk about their feelings and come to a conclusion that no one really knows what they are doing fully. What is really important is the fact that Leah realises that Abby is not trying to mess with her, that her feelings towards her are true. She is just a little bit confused about the whole situation. They mutually understand they do not want to hurt the other and they want to be more than friends in the end.

Coming back to the topic of coming out. As it was said before, getting into a relationship with Abby helps Leah to come out to their friends, which happens at the very end of the novel. They are at their prom when the girls kiss when they get away from the others for a moment. However, they then hear someone approaching them and before they manage to react, it is too late. Thankfully, it is only Simon and Bram. As it is described in the book, they both stare at them with their mouths hanging open and Simon looks like he is waiting for the punch line.¹⁴⁰ That does not come of course, but both Leah and Abby tell the boys that they are bisexual and they react very positively which makes sense really, since they are gay boys in a relationship. Both Simon and Bram even tell them how happy they are for them.

The whole book, therefore, finishes with a happy ending. Leah and Abby get into a relationship while also coming out to some of their closest friends. They are also going to study at the same college which means that not only are they girlfriends, they are also going to share a room in the future. Leah finishes the story by saying that maybe everything is a mess and everything is changing, but it is going to be alright in the end.¹⁴¹

The reactions to the novel are rather mixed. A lot of people found the novel underwhelming and even a little bit disappointing which might be because of it coming out

¹³⁹ "The Problem with Labels in Sexuality and Society," She, last modified April 4, 2021, <https://shiftingherexperience.com/the-problem-with-labels-in-sexuality/>.

¹⁴⁰ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 198.

¹⁴¹ Albertalli, *Leah on the Offbeat*, 199.

after *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* which was a huge success and people must have had high expectations of the sequel, however, the overall reaction is still fairly good. One of the reviews on Goodreads was written by Emily May. They stated that the author does a great job of normalizing queer relationships and also mentioned that they so wish books like this existed when they were in high school.¹⁴² This is a fairly common sentiment nowadays. With all the queer books coming out and being made into big successful shows, one of the examples that could be named is a recently released Netflix show called *Heartstopper*, many older people say they wish something like this existed when they were young and questioning their sexuality or gender identity. This reinforces the idea how important it is to have a positive representation of the LGBTQ+ community because it shows that it does help young people when they see someone like them portrayed in the books, films or tv shows in a positive way.

Another reviewer is called Emily and they seemed very joyful about there being a book where a girl likes a girl. They said that there are many YA contemporary romance about a boy liking a boy and, even though that is also amazing, they stated that they are happy to get to see a different version.¹⁴³ This review is a proof that there really are not enough wlw stories on the market which might have started to change but there is still a long way to go when we compare it to mlm stories which are so much more common even nowadays.

The last example of a review comes from a user called Maria and she said she adored the diversity throughout the book. She described how sure she is that people can learn from the novel and receive a positive message from it.¹⁴⁴ She also explained she was a straight white girl and could not fully understand the struggles portrayed in the book, nevertheless, she was happy to see the representation. This nicely illustrates what it is like for people who identify as straight to read such stories and indicates that they can learn something from the LGBTQ+ themed books and see that queer people are among them and live normal lives too.

¹⁴² “Leah on the Offbeat,” Goodreads, accessed June 9, 2022, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/31180248-leah-on-the-offbeat>.

¹⁴³ “Leah on the Offbeat.”

¹⁴⁴ “Leah on the Offbeat.”

10. What If It's Us

As it was already mentioned, this book is quite different from the previous two. Unlike *Leah on the Offbeat*, it does not belong to the so-called Simon-verse, but is a stand-alone book. The setting is also completely different. Although one of the characters, Arthur, comes from Atlanta, Georgia just as Simon, Leah and their friends do, it all happens in New York, making the atmosphere completely different than it is in the previous books described in this thesis.

What is different too is the fact that it is, indeed, a collaboration between two authors, Albertalli and Silvera. As described by Michael Rebuyas, the two authors first became friends and were emailing and talking about past dating experience which resulted in Silvera suggesting they could write a story together based on their experiences.¹⁴⁵ The only problem was that the two authors do not live in the same city, therefore, they had to write it over the course of three years over text messages, emails and phone conversations.

As it was already explained earlier, what is also different is the topic of coming out. While *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and *Leah on the Offbeat* are both focused on a character that knows they are a part of the LGBTQ+ community, they are not out to their friends and family and they eventually do come out during the plot of the books, *What If It's Us* is not about that. Both main characters are out and every mention about coming out is in the past tense and described only briefly. Thus it is quite different from most of the LGBTQ+ themed books, since the storyline following closeted protagonist who has to come to terms with their sexuality and has to come out in the story is the most common one. It makes sense that this is so because it is a common struggle all queer people have to go through, nevertheless it can become a little repetitive. *What If It's Us* is a little bit stereotypical because it is about boy love but it does not follow the coming out storyline.

What should be mentioned is the fact that because it is a collaboration between two authors, the vibes of the book are completely different from the books only Albertalli wrote. It is not the only reason, of course, but it is a rather big factor to put into consideration when analysing the style it is written in. Some readers mentioned that they were dissatisfied with having difficulties to differentiate between the two characters, while others were rather pleased with it, claiming that Albertalli and Silvera's styles blended so well.

Already described before, coming out is not a focus of this book. It is rather concerned with trying to find one's place in the dating world and dating for the first time. It should be

¹⁴⁵ Michael Rebuyas, "On meet-cutes and cosmic intervention: An interview with Becky Albertalli and Adam Silvera," *Medium*, January 13, 2021.

mentioned that it is important for young queer people to read stories like this as well because a lot of teenagers today are quite comfortable with their sexuality and are out to either everyone or at least to some people, and the topic of coming out might not be that important to them. They do not really need to read about it anymore. It is possible that a fairly large number of people would appreciate to see more stories like this, without the heavy focus on coming out.

Nevertheless, there are, indeed, a few references of coming out. For example, right at the beginning of the novel, Arthur mentions his coming out to his two best friends.¹⁴⁶ It is mentioned very casually when he is describing their friendship. Moreover, he also hints how he came out to his parents. He states that he simply blurts things out and seems not to be able to stay quiet and keep to himself.¹⁴⁷ Both of these examples clearly indicate how normal it is for him to be gay. Of course, he does not go around and tell people that he is a gay, which he also mentions in the story, but it is just something that is generally accepted by people who are close to him. When it comes to Ben, he does not really talk about his coming out to people which also shows that it is not a focus of the story.

What is good about the story is how realistic the relationship is. There are aspects that are overexaggerated for the sake of the story, for instance, the way they go on the first date multiple times and calling it a do-over, because they wanted their first date to be perfect. However, other than that it is pretty much very close to reality. For example when Arthur stresses over the thought of how many days should be between dates or how does one find out if they are their boyfriend or if they are still in their dating phase.¹⁴⁸ It is clear only from this small snippet that it is Arthur's first relationship because he gets so nervous and uncertain when he is around Ben. On the other hand, Ben did have a boyfriend before him and puts some kind of responsibility on himself, especially when he thinks about having sex with his boyfriend because he does not want to mess it up since he is his first boyfriend. It is apparent from both of their perspectives that they think about issues that are a part of basically every relationship, especially those first ones. Moreover, they are obviously both flawed, but still somehow find a way to make their relationship, or friendship eventually, work.

As the whole novel is written in a realistic way, the ending is no different from the rest of the book. Because of the circumstances they find themselves in—for example Arthur is going back to Georgia, they would not know how to maintain a long-distance relationship, etc.—they decide to break up and stay friends. Many readers who enjoyed the book were not

¹⁴⁶ Becky Albertalli and Adam Silvera, *What If It's Us* (New York: Balzer + Bray, 2018), 8.

¹⁴⁷ Albertalli et al., *What If It's Us*, 41.

¹⁴⁸ Albertalli et al., *What If It's Us*, 136.

satisfied with such a realistic ending because they were hoping for a happy ending and instead got a very bittersweet one. Although, there is a hint their relationship could possibly evolve once again. In the epilogue, sixteen months after they have ended their romantic relationship, Ben finishes his story which he has been writing during the whole book and even before he met Arthur, and the first thing he does is call his friend. They talk about his story and Arthur mentions he will always beg him for a sequel to keep the story going.¹⁴⁹ They keep talking about it, saying it would be similar to their do-overs of their first date and it is apparent they are not talking about the story but rather their relationship instead. Ben even states that he is sure they are not talking about his book anymore.¹⁵⁰

Although the portrayal of their relationship is a positive one with all of their parents and friends being completely fine with them being gay, there is one scene in which an encounter with a homophobic person happens, and it is also followed by Arthur having a panic attack. This shows that even though the setting is placed in New York, a city that is usually seen as an open-minded place full of diversity, things like this still can happen. In chapter twenty, Ben and Arthur are in a subway train, cuddling together when another passenger tells them that no one wants to see that while other passengers are watching. He keeps on going, telling them to keep it at home so his kid did not have to see them.¹⁵¹ It is clear that this man is not used to seeing other than straight people showing affection to each other. He keeps on going without actually mentioning what is the problem, even though that is fairly obvious to everyone on the train. It seems he has a problem with formulating his thoughts, either because he is too agitated or maybe even afraid to say it out right. This is followed by Ben and Arthur getting off at the next stop and Arthur having a panic attack because of the whole situation. Ben tries to calm him down but it proves difficult because Arthur shakes him off and tries to collect his thoughts. He says that he thought that New York was cool with gay bars and pride parades and same-sex couples holding hands.¹⁵² It is obvious it has shaken him badly, especially because he was not expecting such a confrontation.

This scene might be an important message for people who are not exactly comfortable with seeing same-sex couples, the reasons being never really encountering them or maybe their parents or other parental figures told them it was something that was bad and to be ashamed of, so they simply believed it is something sinful. Seeing how protesting against their affection

¹⁴⁹ Albertalli et al., *What If It's Us*, 273.

¹⁵⁰ Albertalli et al., *What If It's Us*, 273.

¹⁵¹ Albertalli et al., *What If It's Us*, 152.

¹⁵² Albertalli et al., *What If It's Us*, 152.

can affect might educate those who may want to address it too and possibly even prevent them from doing so.

On the other hand, what is also worth mentioning is the portrayal of other sexualities. Even though it is only a brief remark, it gets the message across and may help someone who identifies as such feel seen and validated. When Arthur talks to his two colleagues, one of them mentions she is a biromantic ace and proceeds to try to explain but Arthur cuts her off by saying that he knows what it means he just did not know she identified as one.¹⁵³ Again, this might seem insignificant but it can mean so much to someone who did not see such representation in popular media and, to be fair, biromantic ace people do not get that much representation in general.

Similarly to *Leah on the Offbeat*, the reactions were again a mixture of positive and negative reviews. Those people who gave it a lower number of stars usually wrote about having high expectations and Albertalli and Silvera both being established authors of YA literature, they had more faith in the book and simply thought it could be better, at least in some parts. However, the number of positive or neutral responses still exceeded the negative ones.

One comment was quite frequent and that was the one about pop culture references. A lot of people complained that there were simply too many of them which could cause problems, because if someone is not familiar with, for example, two musicals that are referenced quite a lot, *Dear Evan Hansen* and *Hamilton*, parts of the book might leave them very confused. It is for the characters to have hobbies and reference their favourite musicals but it definitely should not leave some readers not understanding whole paragraphs of the novel which was the case with some of the reviewers.

Moving onto some particular reviews left for this book. User called Jami said that they appreciate the fact that Ben is gay and also Puerto-Rican meaning this is the example of ownvoices for Silvera. And although Arthur is a gay man, he is also Jewish which is similarly ownvoices for Albertalli since she was born and raised Jewish.¹⁵⁴ This hints at the ownvoices movement that was mentioned earlier in this thesis, meaning that authors should only tell stories about communities to which they personally belong. It might not be ideal that Albertalli is writing from the point of view of a young gay boy, however, as it is already known she is a part of the LGBTQ+ community and she is Jewish, so it is not as big of a problem, as one could object. Moreover, what Jami really liked about the story is that both of the boys were out to

¹⁵³ Albertalli et al., *What If It's Us*, 54.

¹⁵⁴ "What If It's Us," Goodreads, accessed June 10, 2022, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/36341204-what-if-it-s-us>.

their parents and friends, noting that “it was really nice to have a kind of post coming out queer story.”¹⁵⁵ This proves that there are people who appreciate stories that do not follow the classic coming out storyline.

Another person who reviewed the book was Lia. They were one of those readers who liked how Albertalli and Silvera’s writing styles blended together. They said that it made the novel seem so aligned. Moreover, they appreciated the characters development and how realistic the story was, because it portrayed friendship dynamics, society’s expectations, and problems the boys have to face as close to reality as possible.¹⁵⁶

One of the last people mentioned in this section is Brittini Kristine. They noted that, although they are twenty-eight and do not usually read YA literature anymore, they still wanted to give this novel a chance. They said it is a solid coming-of-age story and it did a wonderful job building the story and the characters of the two protagonist.¹⁵⁷ This shows that even though the story might be intended for a younger audience, everyone can find something for themselves in this book. Brittini Kristine also claimed that the recognition of teenage romances is important but whether or not they last is not really the point.¹⁵⁸ The first love will always be impactful and a learning experience, but not staying together should not be seen as a failure. The reviewer says they really enjoyed this message of the book.

When it comes to the ending of the novel, the reaction was quite divisive. There were people who enjoyed the realistic elements to it. For example, a user named Kai Spellmeier claimed that the ending was their favourite thing about the book, especially because it is so realistic. When Arthur and Ben decide to end their romantic relationship and try to stay friends, it is the healthiest and the most logical outcome of the situation.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, there were those who felt strongly against the ending, for instance a username Warda. They said that they absolutely do not want to accept such an ending, which might be a little far-fetched.¹⁶⁰ However, it proves that there are those who like and care about the characters so much that they simply oppose the ending. What is good is the fact that the sequel called *Here’s To Us* came out last year where the boys’ relationship can be explored further so it is possible for people to finally get a happy ending with these two characters.

¹⁵⁵ “What If It’s Us.”

¹⁵⁶ “What If It’s Us.”

¹⁵⁷ “What If It’s Us.”

¹⁵⁸ “What If It’s Us.”

¹⁵⁹ “What If It’s Us.”

¹⁶⁰ “What If It’s Us.”

11. All Three Books in the Context

When looking at all three books, it is obvious that they are very similar but also different in some aspects. While *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Albertalli's debut novel, is a classic story about a boy who is in the closet to his friends and family, finds a boy whom he likes and gradually comes out to people he cares about, *Leah on the Offbeat* takes it a little further and the protagonist is actually a girl who falls in love with a girl. This has not been very common, especially in the past, when most of the stories were about male gays and lesbians, or all women attracted to other women, were usually more in the background of the stories. Moving onto *What If It's Us*, the novel does not belong to the same universe as the previous two and although the writing style is very similar, according to some too similar, it shows two boys trying to navigate their dating life while being already out to all of their friends and family right from the beginning of the story. This indicates that there has been an overall shift over the five years in Albertalli's writing, going from mlm story about a closeted boy, to wlw story about a closeted girl, finishing with two boys who are proud to be themselves and with a few exceptions such as the scene in the underground when they are met with a blatant homophobia, they do not really focus on the fact they are gay and the story puts the emphasis on different things such as going on a first date and meeting the other's family and trying to solve what they are going to do when Arthur moves back home at the end of the summer.

Unlike around twenty or even ten years ago, it is not hard to find a good queer YA novel. One simply has to go to the nearest bookstore or find an online page for one and there are many options. There are also various articles online with names such as 30 Essential LGBTQ+ Books for YA Readers or 21 Books That Make LGBTQ+ Teens Feel Seen. This proves that there definitely is a market for such books and it is important for young readers to have such representation in popular media. One of the most popular works nowadays is the series by a British author, Alice Oseman, called *Heartstopper*. It is quite similar to *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, in the regard that it is also about a boy loving a boy, the only difference being that this series is in the form of a graphic novel. Moreover, it has also been adapted on the screen, this time as a Netflix show. It is just one of a lot of examples that show that representation and inclusivity is very important. In addition to the two protagonist, there are also lesbians or a trans character, and it can help young people feel seen.

There are people who protest that authors and movie/TV show creators are taking it too far, that having so many LGBTQ+ identifying characters is not normal or natural. However, according to a survey done in 2020, the percentage of the US residents that identify as LGBTQ+

rose to 5.6%, one of the main reasons being the younger generation being more likely to consider themselves to be something other than heterosexual.¹⁶¹ This indicates that the American society has come a long way from the 1960s when being gay was still considered a mental illness and could cause someone their social status and job if people found out they were not straight. Today's environment is so different from those times that one in six adult members of generation z considers themselves a part of the LGBTQ+ community. It is obvious that, generally, people feel safer to come out in today's society and seeing stories about people who are like them must help them quite a lot. But it is a two-way communication. As stated by Gwen Aviles, the market for YA books featuring protagonists who identify as LGBTQ+ is growing as publishers and authors meet a rising demand among young readers for a broader diversity of characters and storylines.¹⁶² This suggest that there are queer people who really want to see themselves being represented and, in return, seeing themselves in books and films may encourage those who are still unsure of their sexuality or gender identity to explore it in a safe way.

All of this shows how far the western society has come in the last fifty or so years. The “bury your gays” trope is definitely not as common as it used to be and even though it is important to know the LGBTQ+ history and the struggles people who identify as a part of the community went through, young readers today get to see queer characters live normal lives with a happy ending. Many authors point out that there is even broader diversity needed, especially considering queer people of colour and transgender representation, therefore it seems there is always a space for improvement.

When it comes to Albertalli's novels, one should not be expecting some great, innovative novels, and even though it would be great to have more fantasy, world-building stories featuring LGBTQ+ characters, it is still important to have books about ordinary queer people living ordinary lives too. Moreover, as it was previously described the USA came a long way when it comes to the LGBTQ+ issues, however, there continue to be regions with growing anti-LGBTQ+ tendencies, especially in the South. For instance, in Texas, there are people in power who want to ban drag shows for kids, claiming children should not be exposed to drag queens and should be protected from events like this. The bill was introduced after a Texas gay bar held a daytime, family-friendly drag brunch and there were those who were strongly against it, thus, the bill came into a consideration. Moreover, similar anti-LGBTQ+ tendencies are also

¹⁶¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, “LGBT Identification Rises to 5.6% in Latest U.S. Estimate,” *Gallup*, February 24, 2021.

¹⁶² Gwen Aviles, “The rise of young adult books with LGBTQ characters — and what's next,” *NBC News*, March 10, 2019.

in Florida where a “Don’t Say Gay” bill was passed by the state house in February this year. As explained by Brooke Sopelsa, Tat Bellamy-Walker and Reuters, the Florida Senate passed a bill that would prohibit classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in the state’s primary schools.¹⁶³ This proves to be quite a dangerous move considering that children who might be a part of the LGBTQ+ community may not have access to information about the community and could be confused or ashamed of how they feel. As described in the article, Senator Annette Taddeo said that it is going to endanger the safety of the LGBTQ+ students and adolescent.¹⁶⁴ This, again, proves that the society did come a long way but there will always be space for improvement and everyone should try to be more open-minded towards the diversity and inclusivity.

¹⁶³ Brooke Sopelsa, Tat Bellamy-Walker, and Reuters, “‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill: Florida Senate passes controversial LGBTQ school measure,” *NBC News*, March 8, 2022.

¹⁶⁴ Sopelsa et al., “‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill.”

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to introduce and analyse Becky Albertalli's books and since the books fall under the category of queer YA literature, the focus was put on LGBTQ+ issues. In the theoretical part various topics were introduced. At first LGBTQ+ terms were explained to help the reader understand the topic with ease. After that, the focus was put on the LGBTQ+ history. Firstly the world history was talked about briefly before moving onto the LGBTQ+ history in the United States. The most important events such as the Stonewall Riots and legalisation of same-sex marriage were discussed in a greater detail.

Afterwards, the topic of Queer Theory was introduced. Its origins were discussed, and it was pointed out that the theory may have come from the educational sphere, however, the cultural events happening at the time the theory started to emerge also had a big impact on it. A connection between the theory and popular culture was also talked about.

The following two chapters were about queer representation in the media, and issues whether heterosexual authors can write queer stories or not. The representation of various identities in literature was talked about, mentioning the "bury your friends" trope as well as explaining the terms queer coding and queer-baiting. As for the question whether straight authors should write LGBTQ+ themed stories, there is not a straightforward answer. In Albertalli's case, people were protesting that a straight cis woman should not be writing about characters who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, which basically led to Albertalli being somewhat forced to come out as bisexual. However, even if she did not come out, one should not assume she was straight. This only points out the heteronormativity that still prevails in the western culture. Moreover, if people could only write about identities and issues that concern them, authors could essentially only write about themselves.

Before moving onto the practical part, issues of Young Adult literature were addressed, focus mostly put on the queer YA literature. The history and the development of the genre were talked about. Moreover, it was explained that changing demographics in the USA promote understanding and tolerance among people which helps YA literature be more varied and focus on topics such as different religions, ethnicities, sexualities, etc. Then queer YA literature is discussed in a greater detail.

In the practical part, Becky Albertalli's books were introduced, with all three books being summarised. As for the first book, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, it was explained that the topic of coming out is the most prominent since the protagonist is a closeted boy, talking about LGBTQ+ issues with his new online friend Blue. They discuss everything

LGBTQ+ related which helps Simon. His coming out to various people in his life was discussed. Moreover, the readers' reaction to the book was briefly mentioned.

Then the focus moved onto *Leah on the Offbeat*. It was explained that the protagonist is also closeted and tries to navigate this fact with starting to feel attracted to one of her friends Abby. The topic of being in the closet and coming out, especially to her best friend Simon, was described as well as Leah's relationship with Abby.

After that, the attention was put on the last book called *What If It's Us*. It was explained that it is quite different from the other two books, because everything happens in New York. What was also discussed is the fact that both protagonists are out to their friends and family, therefore, the novel is not focused on the topic of coming out, rather on the two boys' relationship.

The last chapter was about all three books and putting them into context. It was explained how the market of queer YA literature changed and how easier it is to find an LGBTQ+ themed book with a happy ending or various sexualities and gender identities represented nowadays. What was also discussed is the way how LGBTQ+ people demand more representation and inclusivity and in return how that helps other queer people to come to terms with their sexuality or gender identity. The last part of this chapter is about the need of positive representation in times like these. Society may have come a long way but there are rising anti-LGBTQ+ tendencies in some states, especially in the south, therefore it is important to have books and other media that shows people the positive side of things.

Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na LGBTQ+ tematiku a její znázornění v knihách Becky Albertalli. Jedná se o tři díla, která se řadí pod Young Adult literaturu s LGBTQ+ tematikou. Knihy *Probuzení Simona Spiera* a na ni navazující *Holka mimo rytmus* jsou psané pouze Albertalli, zatímco *Co když jsme to my* je spolupráce s jejím přítelem a kolegou Adamem Silverou. Diplomová práce je rozdělena do dvou částí. V té teoretické jsou vysvětleny LGBTQ+ pojmy, nastíněna historie LGBTQ+ jak ve světě, tak konkrétně ve Spojených státech. Také je vysvětlena Queer teorie a následně je prodiskutováno téma znázornění LGBTQ+ postav a otázka, zda mohou autoři, co nejsou součástí LGBTQ+ skupiny, psát knihy s touto tematikou. V teoretické části je také projednána Young Adult literatura, především ta s LGBTQ+ tematikou. V praktické části je poté představen děj všech tří knih a následně se rozebírá LGBTQ+ tematika v každé z nich. Tato část je zakončena kapitolou, ve které jsou díla vložena do kontextu dnešní YA literatury.

Jak již bylo zmíněno, v praktické části se práce nejprve zaměřuje na LGBTQ+ termíny a jejich definice. Je podstatné těmto pojmům rozumět, aby čtenář později chápal, o co se v práci jedná a neměl problém něčemu porozumět. Jsou vysvětleny pojmy jako coming out, bisexualita a s ní spojená bifobie, gay, homofobie nebo také třeba termín queer, který se do češtiny nepřekládá a nemá tak svůj český ekvivalent. Znalost těchto pojmů člověku usnadní orientaci v této diplomové práci, zejména v její praktické části, kdy je teorie aplikována na praxi.

Další kapitola je věnována historii LGBTQ+. Nejprve jsou stručně představeny světové dějiny a poté jsou prodiskutovány konkrétní události a hnutí a to ve Spojených státech. Mluví se o událostech jako Stonewallské nepokoje, počátky tzv. duhových pochodů nebo o legalizaci sňatků osob stejného pohlaví.

Dále se diplomová práce soustředí na Queer teorii. Nejprve je vysvětleno, že je toto téma obtížné definovat. Hovoří se o původu této teorie s tím, že vychází ze sféry vzdělávání, ale velký vliv na ni měly i kulturní události z doby, ve které vznikala. Na závěr je poukázáno, že je teorie interdisciplinární a pomáhá vytvářet nové způsoby myšlení.

Také je projednáno téma zobrazení LGBTQ+ tematiky v médiích. Je vysvětlen fenomén „bury your gays“, což poukazuje na příběhy, které často končily pro LGBTQ+ postavy tragicky. Jsou probrány pojmy queer coding a queerbaiting a jaký je mezi nimi rozdíl.

Poté se práce přesouvá ke kariéře Becky Albertalli, jejím dílům a také k tématu, které se zaměřuje na otázku, zda mohou spisovatelé, kteří nepatří do LGBTQ+ menšiny, psát příběhy s touto tematikou či nikoli. V této kapitole je i vysvětleno, že se našli lidé, kteří vznesli

námítku, že by heterosexuálové neměli psát příběhy o lidech, kteří patří do LGBTQ+ menšiny. I z tohoto důvodu Albertalli sepsala článek, kde vysvětlila, že se identifikuje jako bisexuálka.

Poslední kapitola z teoretické části se soustředí na Young Adult literaturu, především tu s LGBTQ+ tematikou. Hovoří se o historii a vývoji tohoto žánru s tím, že jeho počátek jako samostatného žánru sahá do první poloviny 20. století. Je vysvětleno, že měnící se demografie v USA podporuje porozumění a toleranci vůči různým menšinám, mezi něž patří i LGBTQ+ skupina. Toto pomáhá tomu, aby YA literatura zahrnovala témata jako jsou různá náboženství, etnika, ale také právě sexualita. Poté je prodiskutována YA literatura s tematikou LGBTQ+ od její historie po to, jak žánr vypadá v současnosti.

V praktické části jsou představeny knihy Becky Albertalli. Dochází ke shrnutí děje všech třech knih. Navíc je také třeba poukázáno na to, že bylo *Probuzení Simona Spiera* v roce 2018 zfilmováno, tudíž měl příběh příležitost oslovit širší publikum a být inspirací k tomu, aby si lidé přečetli knihu a možná tak narazili i na ostatní tvorbu Albertalli.

Následně je každému příběhu věnována jedna kapitola. Kniha *Probuzení Simona Spiera* je zaměřena především na téma coming out. Je to z toho důvodu, že je hlavní postavou Simon, který se se svou sexualitou nikomu zatím nikdy nesvěřil. Přemýšlí o tom, jakým způsobem se svěřit přátelům a rodině a zároveň si o této tématice dopisuje se svým přítelem online. Poté se pozornost přesouvá na knihu *Holka mimo rytmus*, která na *Probuzení Simona Spiera* navazuje. Je vysvětleno, že je hlavní hrdinka v podobné situaci jako byl Simon na začátku příběhu, tudíž se se svou sexualitou také nikomu nesvěřila. Je poukázáno na to, že jsou sice knihy podobné, ale také je vysvětleno, že je kniha o bisexualitě a vztahu dvou dívek, což není tak časté téma jako láska dvou chlapců. Dále je dán prosto knize *Co když jsme to my*. Je vysvětleno, že je kniha odlišná od předešlých dvou hlavně proto, že se děj odehrává v New Yorku na rozdíl od tzv. Simonverse, který je zasazen do Atlanty. Také je poukázáno na to, že se ani jedna z hlavních postav nijak netají se svou sexualitou. Všichni jejich přátelé a rodiny vědí, že je přitahuje stejné pohlaví a proto je téma knihy zaměřeno spíše na jejich vztah a to, jak se snaží pochopit svět okolo nich a zorientovat se. Příběh je vesměs pozitivní, avšak v jedné části se autoři snaží poukázat na homofobii, která je bohužel stále součástí západní kultury. Tato kapitola se věnuje i tomu, jak je konec knihy realistický a jak na to reagují různí čtenáři.

Poslední kapitola praktické části se věnuje tématice všech třech knih a zasazuje je do kontextu současné tvorby v rámci YA literatury s LGBTQ+ tematikou. Je vysvětleno, jak se v posledních letech změnil trh s YA literaturou a je nyní mnohem snazší najít knihu, ve které se mluví o LGBTQ+ tématech a nejen to, narozdíl od knih napsaných před dvaceti, třiceti lety, často končí šťastně a je zastoupeno víc sexualit a genderových identit. Diskutuje se také o tom,

jak se lidé, kteří jsou součástí LGBTQ+ menšiny dožadují většího zastoupení a chtějí, aby byly knihy více inkluzivní. To na oplátku pomáhá jiným lidem vyrovnat se se svou sexualitou či genderovou identitou. Poslední část této kapitoly se věnuje potřebě pozitivního zobrazení LGBTQ+ tématu v této době. Přestože společnost urazila již dlouhou cestu od dob, kdy byly jiné sexuality než heterosexuality považovány za duševní nemoci, v některých státech, zejména na jihu Spojených států, sílí anti-LGBTQ+ tendence a proto je důležité mít knihy a jiná média, která lidem ukazují pozitivní stránku věci.

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