

Rise in Canadian Children's LGBTQ2+ Literature Offers More Reflection and Understanding

BY MARYLYNN MILLER OKE

It seems that a character's sexuality, gender identity or same-sex parents may no longer be the whole story. And that's a good thing. According to those in the know, Canadian LGBTQ2+ literature is evolving. However, just like the kids who read it, there is still some growing left to do before everyone feels properly represented in the literature.

Experts from the connected worlds of academia, libraries and bookstores share their frontline insights.

LGBTQ2+ Voices are Pumping up the Volume

Thanks to greater awareness on many fronts, Canadian LGBTQ2+ literature for children is entrenching its rightful place in Canadian bookstores, libraries and family homes.

Dr. Rob Bittner is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Postdoctoral Research and Teaching Fellow at the University of British Columbia iSchool.

"Within my own work, I have seen a definite increase in the number of Canadian LGBTQ2+ books for children and teens," observes Dr. Bittner. "The overall landscape seems to have become more open and prominent, with many children's publishers having at least one or two offerings of LGBTQ2+ books available in their catalogues each year, if not each season."

Although he feels that it is easy to list LGBTQ2+ YA from the last 20 years, it can be more challenging to identify Canadian books.

"That being said, there are many authors who cross the border in terms of the work that they produce. Authors like Mariko Tamaki (*Skim*; *(You) Set Me on Fire*), Robin Stevenson (*Pride*), Tom Ryan (*Way to Go*; *Keep This to Yourself*), M-E Girard (*Girl Mans Up*), and E.K. Johnston (*That Inevitable Victorian Thing*)."

However, he credits a larger presence of Canadian publishers at conferences in the US and around the world for ensuring more mainstream presence.

"This allows the work of queer authors to cross borders and become a part of not only Canadian educational institutions and awards, but also a more regular part of reading experiences of young people outside of Canada."

Scott Robins, Children's Services Specialist with the Don Mills Branch of Toronto Public Library (TPL) is one of the selectors for the library. He purchases children's books for 16 branches in the city and curates the library's Pride Collection, which has expanded its materials for adults, children and teens since its original inception in 1992.

"I would say there is definitely more," answers Scott. He adds, "LGBTQ2+ books for teens have really exploded in the past five years."

Hope in the Form of Diversity

It appears that publishers are stepping up to keep up with modern society. Stories are focusing on diverse LGBTQ2+ families and moving beyond tales of victimization to stories of hope and inclusion.

Ken Settingington was the first Children and Youth Advocate for Library Services for TPL and is the author of *Mom and Mum are Getting Married* and *Branded by the Pink Triangle*. As the rights of the LGBTQ2+ community have been championed and recognized across Canada, he feels that the dramatic change in society over the past 25 years is undeniable.

"It isn't surprising that literature for children reflects that change," reveals Ken. "Diversity has always been a hallmark of Canadian children's literature with publishers pushing the boundaries of what is accepted."

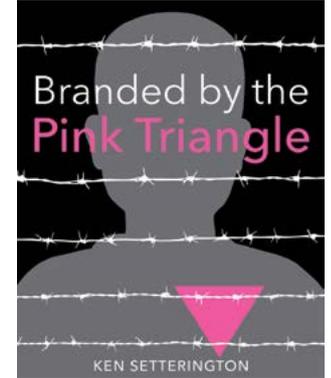
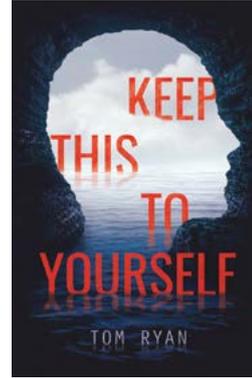
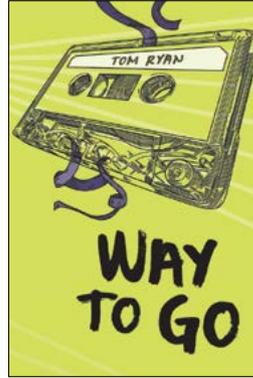
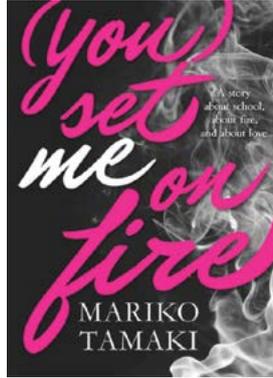
MJ Lyons manages Glad Day Bookshop in Toronto. He is a Toronto-based writer, journalist and game maker and recently published his debut novel, *Murder at the World's Fair*.

According to MJ, the publishing industry is finally coming to terms with the fact that the LGBTQ2+ community has always been diverse in terms of racial and gender identities. He is encouraged that more and more LGBTQ2+ titles now exist to reflect diversity.

"We're finally seeing two black dads, or non-binary kids, or inter-racial couples and their blended families."

"I also think of recent updates to the *Heather Has Two Mommies* type of story, like Natalie Meisner's, *My Mommy, My Mama, My Brother, and Me* with illustrations by Mathilde Cinq-Mars. Again, white couples still exist, but so do racially diverse families."

He consistently hears from families, both within and outside of the LGBTQ2+ community, that they want to show their kids that diverse families exist. "Not just families that look like their own, but with different skin colours, hair textures, body shapes, gender identities, families with multiple parental units or co-child rearing. LGBTQ2+ people broke the mould of what families 'have to' look like. Now we're defining our own versions of families and there are a lot of them!"



Tired Tales Give Way to a New Awakening

MJ also believes that victimization stories, such as children who are bullied at school for being gay or parents coming to terms with their child's sexuality, are making room for more inspiring reading.

"Any queer or trans person of any age could tell you stories of bigotry and oppression, but that's only one facet of our stories. Especially in terms of children's literature, the LGBTQ2+ community is trying to tell our own resilient, diverse stories. We're trying to impart to children that there's plenty to be hopeful about and celebrate about our identities."

Voicing Acceptance

Scott from TPL reflects, "In terms of a changing society's acceptance of the existence of LGBTQ2+ people and also the fact that LGBTQ2+ youth are coming out earlier or identifying as trans earlier, there is definitely a need for this kind of material for parents to understand or for kids to see themselves in the books that they are reading."

"I see that publishers are publishing more of these books and that tells me there is demand for it," he states. "There is pressure from readers, librarians and from children's and youth authors as well. They want these books to get out there. When a book is successful, that helps too."

Crediting initiatives such as the OwnVoices Movement and the We Need Diverse Books organization from the US for an increase in LGBTQ2+ literature for kids, Scott feels publishers are motivated to seek out people who identify as LGBTQ2+ to write those books.

"When someone in that community is writing from their own personal knowledge and experiences, it tends to be more authentic and have a stronger voice," says Scott.

Dr. Bittner also sees the increase in LGBTQ2+ representation derived from the work and activism of more vocal readers, educators and authors.

He states, "With more authors openly discussing their gender and sexuality, publishers are making it more evident through their publishing lists that gender and sexuality are an important part of the lives of young people and should therefore be a larger part of the literary landscape of children's and YA literature in Canada."

With Progress Comes Resistance

As with any steps forward, the growth of LGBTQ2+ literature is also subjected to obstacles.

According to Dr. Bittner, "Canadian authors of queer literature for children and teens have been getting greater recognition from awards committees, which is exciting, but has also led to backlash at times, as in the case of Raziel Reid's *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*."

Scott points to the current political and societal climate. "There has definitely been a bit of a pendulum swing and a bit of a backlash against gender- and sexuality-type related books for kids and teens. The political climate is giving people the allowance to speak their mind about things and in a lot of cases they are speaking negatively against gender- and sexuality-related topics. A little tricky, but this is how progress is made."

Subtle Themes and New Genres Allude to Changed Mindset

Elizabeth Ferguson, the general manager of Mabel's Fables Bookstore, is a buyer and reads many of the store's middle grade and YA novels. She feels LGBTQ2+ content has become less niched and more mainstream.

"There are more LGBTQ2+ authors which means the work has become more nuanced and authentic," notes Elizabeth. "It's not just suffering through a non-supportive family or coming out story but there are also cute romances."

She cites *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up with Me* by Mariko Tamaki as an example of a book where the main character's sexuality is not the main story.

"It's also nice to not always read sob stories about people not being accepted by their families. It's just part of who they are. There is a shifting towards being more of an aspect of the story as opposed to the entire challenge that the protagonist has to overcome."

Elizabeth indicates that LGBTQ2+ secondary characters are also very prominent. She feels that it is a scenario more indicative of real life.

Ken says, "The main difference that I see now is that there are a great many titles that feature LGBTQ2+ characters. Not always in the main character positions, but in supporting roles such as uncles, aunts and neighbours. They aren't the token 'gay' character, but just part of the society in which the main character lives. LGBTQ2+ isn't the big deal it used to be."

Scott loves that within teen books now, many LGBTQ2+ characters are appearing in many genres such as science fiction and fantasy. "There is real exploration of how these characters exist in these different worlds which I think is really very interesting. Especially, with teen books, because of the age group you can deal more with romance and relationships. In middle grade books it can only hit a certain point. I think that we're living in a really interesting time for this kind of literature right now."

MJ reveals, "Queer and trans kids still want to read stories where kids like them are having adventures."

Spectrum of Books

LGBTQ2+ characters are becoming increasingly visible in many different types of books from board and picture books, to middle grade and teen fiction, including graphic novels.

"I think that you're definitely seeing the spectrum of the LGBTQ2+ experience that is being illustrated in the various kinds of books that are coming out," observes Scott, referring to kids who identify as trans, are questioning, live with same sex parents or are gender non-conforming or gender fluid.

It seems trans and non-binary narratives are starting to feature more prominently in picture books such as *Angus All Aglow*, *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* and *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*.

Spectrum of Lived Experiences

Dr. Bittner observed that more picture books are appearing every year, with more nuanced explorations of non-heteronormative families (*My Mommy, My Mama, My Brother and Me; A Plan for Pops; Pride Colors*), and others exploring gender play in childhood (*From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea; Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*). In YA, he notes a slight increase in intersectional queer voices (*Money Boy; Fire Song; Skim; God Loves Hair*).

"Through more intersection approaches to queer and trans experiences, and an emphasis on Indigenous and non-white representations in more contemporary children's and YA literature, Canadian authors are beginning to more successfully build a Canadian queer and trans canon that is distinct from the US publishing industry."

Regarding Canadian YA LGBTQ2+ fiction, he feels there has been an emphasis on sports and masculinity (*Bad Boy; Another Kind of Cowboy; A Boy at the Edge of the World*). He also notes a significant amount of rural queer representation, including island living in areas such as Vancouver Island and the Maritimes.

Windows and Mirrors

Dr. Tara Goldstein is a professor in the area of gender, sexuality and schooling at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of Toronto; the Principal Investigator of a research study called *The Experiences of LGBTQ2+ Families in Ontario Schools* (www.LGBTQ2+familiespeakout.ca); and has just published a book called *Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School: Letters to Teachers*.

Dr. Goldstein states, "The increased number and types of LGBTQ2+ books that are now available have provided LGBTQ2+ children, youth and parents with far more opportunities to see themselves and their families represented in the books they see in bookstores and in public libraries."

Elizabeth also recognizes the importance of the widening scope of LGBTQ2+ literature for children. "I absolutely love when someone comes in and says, 'I know a teen and I think they are really struggling and they haven't said anything. Do you have any narratives that have a gay character in it so they can see themselves represented?' Or maybe they are questioning and having a hard time fitting in. It's a pivotal moment."

Elizabeth describes Robin Stevenson's books as an accessible and affirming reference and resource. She also expresses how important it is that everyone feels represented and can connect with the book's characters. As LGBTQ2+ content becomes increasingly mainstream, she feels more people are discovering a greater common ground. "It is beneficial to read about characters and to see that the other side is not really that different at all."

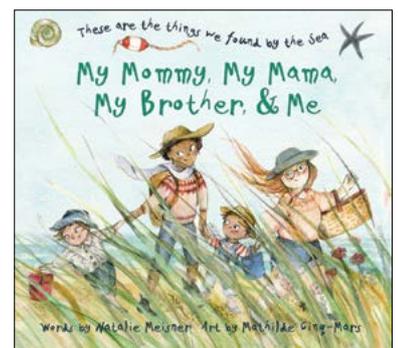
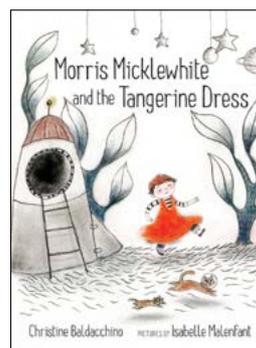
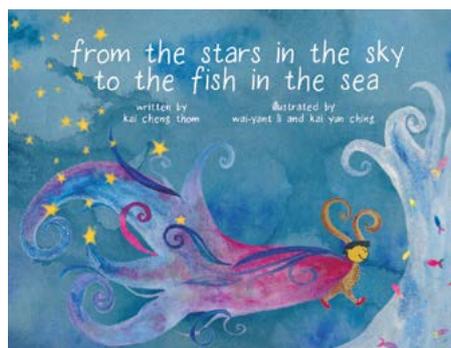
"There is that whole windows and mirrors metaphor that's used for children's books a lot," says Scott. "Where kids who identify as something, see themselves in books, they get a sense that they exist, they matter, they are important and their stories are being told. They are not alone out there and there are other people out there who are like them."

Scott feels that more kids are identifying as part of that spectrum of gender and sexuality. He thinks authors are doing a great job of presenting children as queer. In contrast, he feels the books provide a better understanding for kids and families who don't identify as queer in any way.

Busting through the roadblocks

Although progress is afoot and the future looks promising, the experts explain that more needs to be done to expand the scope of Canadian LGBTQ2+ literature for children.

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There is still a need for more Indigenous representation, as well as more books written in French. Additional effort is needed to include queer sexualities beyond gay and lesbian, including asexuality. However, much more work needs to be done to include trans and intersex characters. Availability of sex education books for non-binary and transgender students has also been identified as an area that is lacking.

Although it's starting to change, there is an apparent lack of lesbian representation. And while there are some great gender diversity titles available, they are not keeping up with the community, especially assigned-female-at-birth kids who want to explore more masculine identity.

In terms of reading at the library, a general wariness exists in terms of discussion and identifying oneself as reading gender- and sexuality-related books. It's observed that kids tend to read them in the library rather than sign them out.

As Canada is a smaller market, it's difficult for publishers to find Canadian authors and titles that are written by authentic voices. Finally, authors may be fearful to write LGBTQ2+-themed books if they do not identify with the community, while publishers fear backlash if the books are not created by authentic voices.

En Route to the Mainstream

Our experts also share their reasons for optimism. No longer confined to the sideroads, LGBTQ2+ stories are becoming less niche and more mainstream. While hoping for more, increased numbers of gender and sexuality literature titles are available in Canada. Efforts are being made to create a balloon effect so books are available everywhere.

As the books featured during Pride celebrations indicate, publishers are actively looking for authentic voices to push the boundaries further with LGBTQ2+ literature. Additionally, it seems that plenty of Canadian authors are rising to the challenge to write diverse stories.

More, more, more

The path to ensuring the LGBTQ2+ community finds a place to call home in Canadian children's literature is far from straight and narrow. It's broadening with more stories, more voices, and encouragingly, with more acceptance. Ultimately, kids can find themselves in the books they read, giving them even more power and freedom to be themselves.

One last thought

"I was a nerdy kid who grew into a nerdy adult," recalls MJ. "When I was younger, I always craved the sort of epic adventure books that have always existed for straight people. Exploring identity and having those resources is very important for kids, but I want to see more diverse kids going on adventures in space, or as super-heroes, or fighting dragons. Queer and trans kids have expansive imaginations just like any other, and I want to show them they can be heroes in their own stories." 🏳️

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Stonewall Awards

Canadian authors, Paul Yee, Ken Setterington, Christine Baldacchio and Robin Stevenson have received the Stonewall Honor Award for their books featuring LGBTQ2+ themes.

Glad Day Bookshop

Created in 1970, Glad Day Bookshop was founded to serve the burgeoning gay and lesbian community in Canada. It is the world's oldest surviving LGBTQ2+ bookstore as well as Toronto's oldest surviving bookstore. Also, a community hub, it is believed to have the largest collection of LGBTQ2+ titles in the world. gladdaybookshop.com

The Pride Collection — Toronto Public Library

Evolving out of public demand, the Pride Collection highlights books, movies and magazines of special interest to people in Toronto's LGBTQ2+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex and two-spirited) community. torontopubliclibrary.ca/books-video-music/specialized-collections/gay-lesbian.jsp

A Hot Press Makes a Mark

It seems that publishers like Flamingo Rampant Press in Toronto are taking matters into their own hands and are making a big impact.

"We can't keep the Flamingo Rampant books on the shelf," says MJ Lyons. "Like *M is for Mustache* by Catherine Hernandez, *Love is in the Hair* by Syrus Marcus Ware and *Moondragon in the Mosque Garden* by El-Farouk Khaki & Troy Jackson. *47,000 Beads* by Koja Adeyoha and Angel Adeyoha is especially resonant with customers. How often do you see two-spirit themes explored in children's books?"

Dr. Goldstein reiterates the big impact of small publishers.

"LGBTQ2+ children, youth and parents have started writing and publishing their own literature. For example, Flamingo Rampant, a Toronto-based micro-press, has been producing feminist, racially-diverse LGBTQ2+ positive children's books for several years so that 'kids of all kinds [can] say with pride — that kid's just like me!'".