

The Power of Positive Queer Representation in the Media

Written by Zoe Bauer

When the lights turned back on, I found two sophomores holding each other, laughing and sobbing, overwhelmed with what they had just seen: a movie that gave characters like them a happy ending. As the president of my school's Gay-Straight Alliance, I had just hosted a showing of the Brazilian film "The Way He Looks," a film about the budding love between two high school boys. The event took a lot of planning; I had to find the time and space to meet, organize the club members, provide food, and make sure that my school's administration allowed the showing to take place at all. With all of these hurdles cleared, it was finally time for the big day. After school on a Friday, about thirty high school students gathered to watch the movie, and the event made me reflect on the importance of representational media for queer youth such as myself and the others in the room.

Positive media representation changed my life. When I was young, I knew I was out of step with my peers, but I didn't know why. Was I a loser? Was I a nerd? Was I destined to be different forever? I was pondering those ideas when I started watching a television show where a main character realizes that she is a lesbian. It struck a chord in me, but I didn't yet know why. I was intrigued. What was it about her that was so interesting? Finally, I realized: by seeing this television character go through this process of discovering herself, I learned that I could discover myself, as well. Inspired by this information and after a lot of thought and research, I realized that I also was a lesbian. Without this television show, I might never had put two and two together.

Books and media have the power to give queer youth different, more hopeful visions of themselves. A trans teen can read books about other trans characters, realizing that it's possible to be happy. A non-binary teen can find books that they love, where they can escape to a happy place and get strength from other similarly-identifying characters. A gay teen can watch a movie that shows the best parts of being gay, where it's not something that is scorned or abhorred. Queer teens can see the positive sides of their identities reflected back at them in media. They can learn from those other characters, get hope from them, and get strength from them.

In a world that often tells queer youth that we have no reason to be happy or love ourselves, positive representational media is invaluable. It can be the only voice of love or strength in a young person's life, and it can be what convinces us to keep going. These external sources of validation from the media can sometimes be the only permission that queer young people ever receive to be ourselves. By seeing people like us who have happy futures in books, television, and movies, we learn that happy futures are possible for us, as well.

In the movie that I showed to my GSA, the two main characters struggle through times of confusion about who they are, who they are attracted to, and what love is and what it means. By the happy ending, the two boys are together and stronger in their union than they were as separate parts. This message of love and of hope strongly affected those of us watching it: students hugged, laughed, and cried. Those in the room who were queer felt understood, both by the characters in the movie and by our straight allies who watched the movie with us. The straight allies sympathized with us in a whole new way. Our faculty advisor had tears running down his cheeks. Allies hugged their queer friends. Siblings held hands. We were able to absorb the hope and the happiness that the movie gave us in a united group, where we could all be fortified by the optimism together. The movie connected everyone in the room, queer and allied. Even if only for an hour and a half, we were all able to feel the power of a happy ending.