

## Lesbians and Literature: An Adventure in Representation

I have nothing against straight people, I swear. My friends are overwhelmingly heterosexual! But I have to be honest: if I pick up a book and get fifty pages in and there are no queer characters in sight, I'm probably going to put it down. I'm a lesbian and a literature lover, and while I try not to let any one of my identities trump another, I simply can't see straight when I'm forced to look at a totally straight world.

I've been seeking representation for a long time, though I wasn't initially conscious of it. When I was in middle school, I loved books about girls and wolves. I devoured stories about daughters who balked their family's warnings and befriend the allegedly dangerous, fearsome beasts roaming nearby forests. I'm not trying to say that lesbians live in the woods and like to scare people (though there are truths to stereotypes involving Sapphic ladies and their love of hiking). But in retrospect, what I loved about those books was the girls who found beauty where everyone else felt fear and hatred. And without getting too blatant, that's queer symbolism at its finest. The authors might have only wanted to tell stories about the role of wildlife in an increasingly spreading suburbia or something like that. But instead they created poignant metaphors that resonated with something deep inside my subconscious.

When my sexuality finally poked its lavender head out of the closet and revealed itself to me, I went looking for books that were a bit more overtly gay. My library's young adult section yielded treasures in the form of Julie Anne Peters, David Leviathan, and countless others that promised worlds of like people out there. These books comforted me, roadmaps showing how to follow a queer path in a straight world. For the time, I was satisfied.

And then, I wasn't.

Don't get me wrong; I think fondly on the books that helped me through those hard, early times; I still love reading the latest from those authors who were constantly by my side. But I realized that sometimes I didn't want stories about *being* gay. I wanted kingdoms and castles, starships and sci-fi, and also queer characters. And I sought what I could find, but choices were paltry, and quite frankly, often little more than trashy tales stuck in Tolkienesque worlds.

So I tried to read the books that everyone praised, the popular high fantasies and dystopias. They were often good, but they didn't fulfil me. I felt separated from the characters; I couldn't identify with the gripping love triangles reviewers constantly fawned over. They were

nice stories, but I didn't fit in their worlds. I tried searching for queerness, telling myself how that butch background character was totally a lesbian – but it just didn't feel right.

And then one day, without fanfare, I realized I was wasting my time. Books entirely lacking queer representation just weren't my thing. There were some exceptions, of course, but I found it disappointing when authors staged novels in the increasingly diverse modern world, or even in the future, and still didn't have their protagonist interact with a single queer character.

So now, I'm here, I'm queer, and I'm reading what I can. It's gotten better; the rise of the e-book has helped, and more authors are realizing that stories can have queer characters without centering around queer issues. A lot of what's out there is still of questionable literary merit, and much of it lacks diversity in areas like race and gender. But there are improvements, albeit slow ones.

I want the same genres as anyone: my gritty urban fantasies, my wilderness adventure stories, my bildungsroman and my historical thrillers. But I cannot rid myself of my identity when I read. I've been seeking representation since before I knew what it was, and I don't intend to stop until stories with queer characters are as common as lesbians hiking in the woods.

*-Caroline Mulligan*