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“Incloseto Putbacko”¹: Queerness in Adolescent Fantasy Fiction

ANNE BALAY

THE TURN INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SHOWS AN INCREASE in young adult fantasy novels that include gay characters and, though these novels follow the many rules that govern behavior (sexual and otherwise) in the fantasy genre, queerness is nevertheless there, and powerful as much because of fantasy’s restrictions as in spite of them. Queerness in these novels, rather than being associated with rule violations or disorderly sexual wildness, gets expressed through the rigid enforcement of invisibility, or lifetime partnerships, or both. This article argues that the presence of same-sex romance, combined with the putative absence of identifiable sex acts in the fantasy genre, open the (closet) door to an expansion of queer sexualities. Further, these sexualities’ hyperromanticism, rather than serving a reassuring, normalizing function, intensifies and foregrounds desire. The proliferation of “arcane restrictions” (Hunt 4) that defines fantasy as a genre establishes limits whose very existence celebrates, rather than frustrates, queer desires.

It is tempting to argue that queerness in Young Adult fantasy, and indeed in all YA fiction, is diluted, sanitized, and desexualized. But this is only part of the story, since observing that queer YA relationships are restricted and closeted does not negate their visceral sexual urgency. On the contrary, I argue that the power of the closet to increase passion by hiding it intersects here with the ironic nostalgia of the fantasy genre *and* with the adolescent search for boundaries. Fantasy fiction is often seen as childish, conservative, and retrospective because it relies on rules and structure. “Fantasy has a narrative logic much post-modern literature does not have” (Nestvold and

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Lake), and it often takes place in an artificially sanitized medieval world. Both of these formal features are nostalgic in the sense that they deliberately recall and recreate the past, yet this nostalgia is ironic and self-aware, since fantasy both draws from these rules and constantly challenges and explodes them to avoid repeating previous texts. As Michael Chabon notes: “A genre implies a set of conventions—a formula—and conventions imply limitations (the argument goes), and therefore no genre work can ever rise to the masterful heights of true literature, free (it is to be supposed) of all formulas and templates” (20). Fantasy, far from being bound by these restrictions is, as Chabon implies, perversely liberated by them, since awareness of rigid formulae leaves room for adaptation, subversion, and pleasure.² Similarly, the innocence and purity of queer relationships in fantasy fiction is what enables their deviant sexiness.

Scholars agree that fantasy fiction avoids sex, and that fantasy fiction for children excludes sex and desire altogether (Lynn x, Hunt and Lenz 5). That’s one of the reasons that quest romance and other forms of fantasy are considered appropriate for children, and, in circular fashion, it explains why adults who follow fantasy are dismissed as juvenile.³ Certainly, these claims are true as far as they go. Yet an absence of coitus or its contemplation does not signify an absence of desire, sexuality, or even perversion. Even a text like *Lord of the Rings*, the quintessence of high fantasy because it is at once suspenseful and innocent, is liberally sprinkled with desires, both queer and otherwise. A reader like Peter Jackson focuses on the deferral component of the fairy tale tradition, while a reader like Jess Battis finds the hobbits queer in both a sexual and a colonial sense. Battis observes that “Sam and Frodo are already queer subjects among queer hobbits ... and the influence of the One Ring has placed Frodo even further from the normative... [H]is body is degrading, growing less visible, while his mind is opening itself to the seductive gaze of Sauron. He is being cruised by the Enemy” (920).⁴ Though Battis shows how this is a scene of gazing, of male bodies, and of desire, it’s not a scene of sexual acts or intentions. Neither Battis’ point nor mine is that all fantasy is somehow queer, or can be read queerly. Instead, fantasy is about rules, and therefore about rule violations, so queerness is always one if its possible subtexts. As gay people have become more prominent in fiction for Young Adult audiences, a change whose complications I will discuss shortly, queerness is quite often present, even

when actual queer people are not. Further, queer sexualities' hyperromanticism in YA texts both serves a reassuring, normalizing function, and intensifies and foregrounds desire.

Fantasy Within the Context of YA Literature

Fiction for young adults, like any commodity, is subject to market pressures. Adolescents read, but they don't generally write, buy, or sell books. Fiction marketed to teens, Yampbell demonstrates, often uses cover art and the internet to promote readership (359), and increasingly relies on controversial, "edgy" topics, covering every conceivable aspect of teen drama except queer sexuality (351). Other than the aisle of a bookstore, there's no clear line between children's and adult fantasy, but one simple distinction is that children's fantasy includes "fantasy books in which the main characters are children rather than adults" (O'Keefe 22). Kids' adult handlers are often anxious about all sexual expression, especially queer sexuality,⁵ and they prefer books with happy endings. Further, as Christine Jenkins observes, any gay characters tend to follow gender norms, are socially isolated from any gay community, and are highly prone to car accidents (320, 309. See also Cart and Jenkins 108). Fantasy fiction can skirt some of these restrictions, partly by relying on cross-over marketing (Lynn xxiv), and partly owing to generic considerations. As Nelson observes, even as early as the Victorian era, fantasy, partly because of its reliance on symbolism, "can permit the veiled expression of concerns about sexuality—even deviant sexuality" (149). One purpose of fantasy fiction is to try out new realities, and expand the limits of possibility, though always referencing the world as we know it. Fantasy fiction for young adults has more room to include queer characters, and to suggest queer reading styles, than can more realistic fiction for young adult audiences, precisely because it is not taken seriously.

The number and quality of young adult books with queer content, though still small, is now rising exponentially. Surveys by Lobban and Clyde (1996), by Day (2000) and by Cart and Jenkins (2006) show a constant increase, which is part of an overall expansion of titles produced for the YA market.⁶ Further, exploration of sexual identity, including queerness in all its forms, is increasingly common

in this fiction. However, almost all of this burgeoning genre is in the realist mode. Though there's significant overlap between fantasy and YA fiction, books with gay characters don't turn up much in that overlap. For example, the 156 titles described in the bibliography *Out Of the Classroom* include only one SF/fantasy item, which is a short story collection not specifically aimed at kids (Lobban 32). And Bauer's groundbreaking anthology *Am I Blue?* contains only one fantasy story.

At the same time, queer fantasy is exploding in its own right, and often with youthful audiences. Slash fan fiction is everywhere, *Star Trek* fans famously beg for just one queer character (McKee 239), and otherwise straight texts are read queerly by teen readers. Further, fantasy authors increasingly include out gay characters, rather than leaving it to their readers to draw parallels between queer subculture and, say, being a wizard in a profoundly Muggle world. Mercedes Lackey has published several series involving gay protagonists; Ricardo Pinto is writing the third in his disturbing and beautiful *Stone Chameleon* series; Lynn Flewelling now has two series revolving around queer situations, and Fiona Patton has a series where everyone seems gay. Also emerging is a category of queer fiction which, while certainly not "high fantasy," is not the everyday toils and trials novel either. Francesca Lia Block falls into this category, as do fairy tales like *Boy Meets Boy*, set in a high school so exaggeratedly tolerant that it houses a drag queen named Infinite Darlene (the star quarterback *and* Homecoming Queen) whose worst problem is that "[t]he other drag queens in our school rarely sit with her at lunch; they say she doesn't take good enough care of her nails, and that she looks a little too buff in a tank top" (Levithan 16).⁷ These works challenge the border between fantasy and realism as part of the same project by which they unsettle presumptive heterosexuality.

In short, gay-themed YA fiction is expanding, as is YA fantasy, and the overlap between these categories is growing as well, though more slowly. Still, the same-sex relationships depicted in these novels are far from the rebellious, revolutionary perversion often linked to queerness.⁸ When YA fiction includes gay sex, it's between loving partners, highly romanticized, and remorselessly vanilla. *Someone Is Watching* is published by a gay press, and hard to acquire except online, so it has more liberty to be graphic since the audience clearly knows what it's getting. In it, the boys have sex, but it is minimally,

discreetly described, and always inserted within a discourse of love and caring. The narrator reflects, "I was filled with a desire fueled by love" and "We weren't having sex, we were making love, and that is an entirely different thing" (Roeder 204). These boys are soul mates in a committed partnership, in which intimacy is emphasized over anything "merely" physical. The narrator, looking at his lover, observes, "We'd developed a closeness that was more intimate than anything I'd ever experienced. Every once in a while, out of the blue, we just hugged each other close" (200). Within this novel, gay people are indistinguishable from straight people in every way except that of their sexual preference. These novels's emphasis on permanent partnerships, on love before sex, and on non-coital intimacy fits within what Roberta Trites identifies as the tendency for YA literature to highlight discourse about gay sex, rather than representing its pleasures. Though this pattern fulfills the "unwritten publishing codes that dominate the production of YA literature" (Trites, "Queer" 147), it also dilutes the freedom and transgressive delight that gay sex celebrates.⁹ Fantasy fiction, in contrast, while still not graphically depicting gay sex, can frame it within a set of rules, and then mobilize playfulness about those rules, to keep its excitement intact.

Queer Readings and YA Fantasy

The YA emphasis on love rather than sex is further heightened (if that's even possible) in the fantasy genre. Typically, queer couples exist not only in permanent relationships, but in quasi-sacred, immutable pairings. Any sex that happens fits within these supernaturally sanctioned bonds. Judith Butler, understanding fantasy as a psychological mechanism, notes that "Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality" (19). Fantasy (here, all meanings of this word apply) and queerness share this constitutive function, since homosexuality serves "not as an inner truth, nor as a sexual practice, but as one of the defining features of the social world in its intelligibility" (Butler 19). Because of how fantasy fiction is constituted, including but not limited to its rules about sexuality, queer folk are never absent. Even if we don't appear, that absence makes queers almost *more* visible, since homosexuality is what makes straightness meaningful—even possible.

For example, it is a commonplace assumption that slash fan fiction is written by 20-something straight women (Henry Jenkins 191). Yet all the processes of writing it and reading it are perverse, not least *because* of the queer fact of its connection to straight girls. Henry Jenkins, whose important early research on fan culture informs much of this argument, describes “poaching” as a form of powerful reading that extends and sustains the “intense emotional experiences” (75) of first textual contact.¹⁰ Because fan fiction is an active reading and viewing practice, Jenkins argues that it encourages extended emotional engagement with narrative in the same place where “questions of sexual identity can be explored outside of the polarization that increasingly surrounds this debate” (221). Teen readers and writers of slash or fantasy fiction are queer because they are deliberately attenuating desire, and doing so through narrative in a manner that makes sexuality irreducible to a binary. And the genre of fantasy encourages this because of its many rules, which are easy to learn and imitate, and its stylized alien, yet familiar, setting.

As Brown and St. Clair point out, there is a proliferation of Young Adult fiction in the U.S. because of our nation’s “obsessive attention to adolescence” which leads, along with technology and the needs of the marketplace, to the “longer interim between childhood and adulthood” (xii). Same-sex eroticism exists as a possibility in the lives and book choices of these teens, but in itself queerness is not the point. Fantasy books, I argue, do more than help questioning kids find themselves. Rather, in common with queer readings, they encourage “the interpretive absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (yet?) have resolved into a sexual specificity of prescribed object choice... Such a child—if she reads at all—is reading for important news about himself” (Sedgwick 2–3). Even reluctant readers read the Harry Potter series, which contains no gay people, but this omission seems to encourage readers to find them anyway.¹¹ Thus, young adult fantasy narratives now commonly include gay characters to the extent that even when queerness is absent, it is constitutive of sexuality and identity (Pearson 17).

Mendlesohn distinguishes SF from fantasy, and observes that successful children’s or YA science fiction is rare, perhaps because SF depends on exploring the consequences of real change, while kidlit usually emphasizes comfort or education (292). Crucially, she goes on to claim that YA SF often follows “a pattern in which the maturity

of the young protagonist becomes a plot substitute for wider change or long-lasting impact" (303). This insight leads in two directions: SF should be more than a drama of personal maturity, *and* SF serves as a metaphor for coming-of-age. Coming out has a similar dual function as a metaphor for the rebellious but proud identity-claiming of adolescence, *and* as a historically and culturally bounded action taken by real people. Further, coming out is endlessly repeatable, and always at least potentially awkward. YA texts may include coming out as a self-perpetuating metaphor for coming of age, more biting and celebratory, but also more sentimental than the resolution of a cultural disruption offered by science fiction. Responses to a query posted on the YALS e-list about high school book choices include the confession: "Mercedes Lackey is a name that conjures high school memories. Her books were almost a cult for me and my friends for that brief, fabulous period in high school where Mercedes Lackey is exactly what you need" (Fine 36). The sweetness of the love stories, the cuddly, tender sex scenes, and the insistence on "lifebonds" or other fantastically permanent and sanctioned couplings make Lackey's homosexuality safe. But that doesn't make it not sexy or somehow not queer enough. I turn next to three examples of fantasy fiction with gay characters—Lynn Flewelling's *Nightrunner* series, Mercedes Lackey's *Last Herald Mage* series, and Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* cluster, which effectively illuminate the paradox of gay inclusion.

Why Fantasy? The Novels of Mercedes Lackey

Mercedes Lackey writes interlocking fantasy series that have an extensive adolescent reader base.¹² Gay characters often appear in her more realistic titles, such as her *Serrated Edge* books or *Bedlam's Bard*—books in which fantastic and magical elements inundate real-world contemporary settings like racetracks, or LA RenFaire. However, Lackey was also the first author working with a mainstream press to publish a gay high-fantasy series. *The Last Herald Mage* (1989–90) is set in Valdemar and focused on the magical and personal growth and quests of its gay hero: Vanyel Ashkevon, known as Demonsbane. Each volume of the series is reviewed as a new Young Adult title in *Booklist*, *Voice of Youth Advocates*, and *Kliatt*, and often the reviews are explicit but understated about the gay content.¹³

Interestingly, Lackey herself doesn't use the word *gay* in her series. Though she uses English words for other affectional and sexual bonds (lover, consort, mistress) she chooses to introduce a new term for homosexuality from the language of the Tayledras, a remote and mysterious culture of nomads. Appropriately, then, a Tayledras counsels Vanyel, after Vanyel sees his lover die and tries to kill himself, to find peace with his identity.

"As you have guessed from my words," he said, "I am *say'a'chern*. As is Starwind. As you.... This is the thing I wish to tell you; in all the world, there are more creatures than just man that make lifetime matings. Among them, some of the noblest—wolves, swans, geese, the great raptors—all creatures man could do worse than emulate, in many, many ways. And with all of them, *all*, there are those pairings, from time to time, within the same gender. Not often, but not unheard of either." (*Pawn* 278)

Three questions arise in this passage, and throughout the series. First, since this situation is so achingly familiar in the lives and literatures of queer folks, what effect does substituting the term *shaych* for *gay* have? (*Shaych* is a common abbreviation for *say'a'chern*.) Further, how does the closeting of queerness required by Lackey's narrative serve to isolate and intensify queer lives and desires? Finally, why limit the observation and *shaych* identity to *paired* animals—to sex sanctioned by love and commitment?

As an adolescent, Van knows he's different (*Pawn* 69) because women don't interest him, but his father shields him from any information about the existence of homosexuality. When he moves away and learns of its possibility, everything is clear to Vanyel, especially his father's attempt to foreclose his desire (*Pawn* 97). Given the recognizability of this discovery, that it has a name only in "some outland tongue" (97) mirrors the lack of a clear label given to homosexuality in early YA fiction. As Fuoss shows, this practice of including something without ever naming it contributes to "the naturalization of what is culturally specific. When the operation of unnamings is successful, cultural constructs appear not as constructs, but as part and parcel of the 'nature of things'" (163). Thus, since there is no foreign, italicized word to describe straight relationships or sexualities, the text imagines them as the neutral, or default option. Yet Lackey doesn't leave queerness unnamed, but gives it a

new invented name in her fantasy world. Though she adopts the cultural coding of gay men wholesale (Vanyel doesn't need to shave, used to wear his sister's clothes, is more acrobatic than aggressive in his swordsmanship, loves fancy clothes and occasions to wear them, and is often called pretty and beautiful) she uses language to keep distance between her text's gay characters, and the existence of actual gay people in the lives and cultures of her readers.

When Vanyel falls in love and acknowledges his preferences, whatever they are named, circumstances immediately compel him to hide. Since Vanyel is underage, and can be effectively imprisoned if his father finds out who he is/loves, his guardian recommends the closet. "So now I'm going to order you; outside of this suite you are to be the same arrogant little bastard that arrived here. And if you can manage to be slightly rude to 'Lendel, that's even better. And in return, I'll make this suite a little sanctuary for the two of you." (*Pawn* 127). Though Vanyel agrees to this secrecy only because it's his only chance to stay with his lover, he also comes to enjoy the charade for its own sake. He likes flirting with court girls, he likes fooling people, and he likes to be in control. It's his guardian who calls off the masquerade when Tylendel is at risk of death, but before there's an opportunity for open, uncloseted behavior, Tylendel dies. Vanyel is left alone, amid rumors that he may be *shaych*, until well into the third book in the series. Are closeting and celibacy somehow more appropriate roles for gay men in YA fiction? Possibly, but more interesting is Vanyel's ongoing and identity-shaping desire, since the reader knows what the characters can only guess. Because it is always forestalled and thwarted, Vanyel's queer desire is always present and powerful.

Vanyel's relationships, when he finally gets them, are sacred, permanent, and have their own italicized name: *shay'krebh'ashbke* (*Pawn* 278 et al). Unlike *shaych*, Lackey also refers to this term by its English translation: lifebond. In these relationships, a character never has to wonder "is he the one?" because there is spiritual and physical confirmation—there is certainty. This privileged partnership is shared by some of Lackey's straight couples, and it doesn't necessarily involve monogamy, but it does enable acknowledged, permanent partnerships. Vanyel and Tylendel have this special bond, so when Tylendel dies, Vanyel assumes his romantic life is over. When Stephan finally seduces him after a long, drawn-out courtship, they

form a lifebond, too (*Price* 142). In fact, by the book's close, it's revealed that Stephan is Tylendel re-embodied, and better and wiser because of his previous errors. Theirs is, then, almost a parody of partnership, since you can't escape it even if you try. There is, literally, no one else.

Lackey's pioneering series has a gay hero, then, but one made less threatening to queer-wary audiences by several strategies: lifebonding, secrecy, and love. Yet these strategies do more than downplay stereotypically homophobic fears; they also bring actual queer people—our problems, our subcultures, our fears—into the narrative. Further, the “generic expectations of fantasy” (McKee 239) make queerness visible and powerful partly by making it un-queer. Drawing on rules and roles of queerness such as sissy-boys, masquerades, outland tongues, etc., makes gay people alien *and therefore* recognizable. As McKee notes, SciFi has to be different from life to be a meaningful genre (243). That's a limitation when depicting gay people, but also a possibility. If one purpose of fantasy is “to comment upon the real world and to explore the moral, philosophical and other dilemmas posed by it” (Lynn xviii, quoting Swinfen), then having gay people who are similar to, but not reducible to, our contemporary sexual minority, makes a proliferation of sexual possibility at least theoretically available. One testament to the effectiveness of Lackey's strategy is the popularity of this series with teen readers, and another is the adoption of these same techniques in several subsequent series.

The Play on 'Faie: Lynne Flewelling

Lynn Flewelling's *Nightrunner* series, published starting in 1996, uses many of Lackey's strategies, and adds some of its own. As Zanger reminds us, “To treat each fantasy as if it were the first of its kind is to ignore the highly conventionalized nature of its form and content. The one expectation that cannot be negated is that some expectation will be negated” (37). Rather than telling the life story of an epic hero, as Lackey does, Flewelling's series follows Alec, the young, confused and appealingly ignorant apprentice of the powerful, though marginalized hero, Seregil. Four volumes are in print, and a fifth is due out soon.¹⁴ Each volume combines the suspense of attempting to save a secondary world from grave threat so familiar in high fantasy

with the long, drawn-out romance between Alec and Seregil. Though it takes two entire volumes for them to become a couple, the gradual unfolding of Alec's self-knowledge, and then his desire, consume varying parts of the first two volumes.

Following fantasy conventions, Alec is very young when Seregil rescues him from the mundane, rural fringes of their alternate world, and begins gradually to introduce him, and thus the reader, to the possibilities and parameters of Flewelling's universe. Alec learns thievery, disguise, his own powers and the magical potential of other races, and the existence of same-sex desire. Alec is from the North, where he and others have heard rumors that same-sex alliances occur in the South and in the cities, but they are skeptical and disapproving. As the novels progress, he learns to be more accepting as he becomes more aware of his own desire for Seregil. Though unnamed, then, their romance is easily recognizable, leading the *Kliatt* reviewer to warn, "I feel I should mention there is a homosexual romance between the two main characters. If this offends, don't read the series" (Cromby 25). Alec first notices what readers have seen all along when, after discussing their meeting and subsequent friendship, "Alec was surprised by an eerie sense of connection as their eyes met; heat like a gulp of brandy sprang up in his belly and spread out from there" (*Luck* 417). Seregil has meanwhile fallen in love with Alec, a situation "far beyond" lust (*Stalking* 139), but which he assumes will be unrequited because of Alec's countrified attitudes, and general sexual reticence. Only after the dramatic, last minute triumph over evil and re-emergence of a peaceful, though troubled world, does Alec acknowledge his feelings and demonstrate them to Seregil (*Stalking* 499).

There is no foreign word in this universe for homosexuality, though it is referred to by none of its English names. However, the brothel district uses a colored light system to announce what type of "pleasures the house purveys. A man wanting a woman would look for a house with a rose-colored light. If it's male company he craves, then he'd choose one showing the green lamp" (*Luck* 255). This imaginary world then seems to vary from the typical YA fiction trope of showing gay couples only in isolation (Christine Jenkins 320) without queer communities or support structures. Yet outside of the commercial sex setting, Alec and Seregil are the only gay characters. The one exception occurs during a dance at court, where Alec sees

two men dancing and “knew without being told that they were talímenios and that they had lived this dance, this mingling of souls, together most of their lives” (*Traitor's* 237). Though this passage might suggest that “talímenios” is a synonym for queer, Flewelling uses its short form, “talí,” as an endearment between any loving partners, suggesting that the term means lover, rather than gay person.

Like Lackey’s lifebond, being talímenios involves supernatural awareness (*Traitor's* 31, 250) and an unarguable, rock-solid social acceptance of the pairing (*Traitor's* 76). But while Lackey includes other gay couples and social networks, Flewelling includes gay subculture through an extended metaphor: Aurënfaië, or “faie.” Though they live among Mycean people, and can pass for them to the uninitiated observer, Aurënfaië are actually members of a separate race. They are very pale and beautiful, live extended life spans, have magical powers, are naturally artistic, and don’t grow facial or body hair.¹⁵ All these gay stereotypes, and that Alec and Seregil are the only “faie” living in Mycena, indicate a parallel with gay culture, but the connection is clinched by the scene where Seregil finally tells Alec about his identity. Everyone else who sees Alec has known about his secret yet visible ethnicity, but Seregil can’t bring himself to take the risk of revelation. Finally, he comes out with it: “Alec, you’re ‘faie.” Alec reacts with shock, but then, “suddenly it all fell into place” (*Traitor's* 227). Seregil explains, “I was afraid I was wrong, just seeing what I wanted to see. But I wasn’t wrong—your features, your build, the way you move” (228). This whole scenario is so familiar that it becomes a pun on, as well as a parallel to, a coming out narrative.

Queering a text by identifying how it transfers the stigma of queerness into some other, alien culture is part of my thought process here. When Pugh and Wallace spend time fleshing out how wizards and werewolves in the *Harry Potter* series resemble gay folks, their argument becomes increasingly plausible—and fascinating—with each parallel they identify. But for Alec and Seregil, there isn’t this substitution—they are faie *and* they are gay. And the heavy-handedness of the pun makes the irony (gay = faie = fey) inescapable. On some level, Flewelling’s series is about the process by which queerness is represented in fantasy fiction by some substitute alterity. Her readers, when we “get” the parallel, are laughing at our search for “important news about” ourselves (Sedgwick 3), *and* at the poignant but also light-hearted way her narrative handles that search. Flewelling

thus adopts the "innocent eroticism" (Zanger 30) of Lackey and countless epic fantastists before her and, though her pairing may seem like "homo lite" since it stresses romance, commitment, and following the rules, it also plays with and challenges those rules, using theatricality and punning to explore their subversive potential.

The Serious Postmodern: Francesca Lia Block

Block's Weetzie Bat stories share with these more traditional epic fantasies a corralling of gay sex and desire into permanent, supernaturally durable pairings. But here, gay sex and desire happen, and get called out by their "real" names. Block's books may qualify more as magical realism than as fantasy. There are genies granting wishes, and impossibly named characters, but the setting is the world as we know it, and the time is contemporary. Rather than categorizing Block's books as realism or fantasy, I follow Susina, who claims that they are somehow both, providing deep, geographical specificity and magical, fantastic transcendence (191). Further, the books' lengths (or rather, their briefness) and their vaguely po-mo, rapid-fire plot twists and surreal setting make reading these books a profoundly different experience from reading mythic fantasy. Brown and St. Clair note that "Genre exerts a significant influence on how the ... protagonists of young adult literature travel their respective journeys from adolescence into maturity" (49). In place of the attenuated, long-awaited discovery followed by angst-ridden disclosure common in fantasy trilogies, not five pages into the narrative we get "'I'm gay,' Dirk said. 'Who, what, when, where, how—well, not *how*,' Weetzie said. 'It doesn't matter one bit, honey-honey'" (7). Epic fantasy feeds on suspense, conflict, and tension, all of which dissolve with these words.

At the same time, the Weetzie Bat books share the trope of permanent partnership with the epic fantasy I've discussed, with each character's romantic and sexual history focused on finding their perfect mate. Duck and Dirk meet at the very beginning of *Weetzie Bat*, and when their tale is retold in the prequel *Baby Be-Bop*, it is presented as a difficult series of events that made their romantic partnership possible. "Where are you? He called silently to his soul mate, the love of his life whose name he did not yet know" (473). Which

boy says this line is immaterial—what matters is the text’s sense that sexuality is about finding the perfect partner, from which everything else unfolds inevitably, if not smoothly.

This romanticism is true of all sexuality in Block’s oeuvre; Weetzie and her love interest, My Secret Agent Lover Man, have the same unflappable permanence. Since it’s not limited to queer people, this coupling is more than an attempt to ward off audience anxiety by not leaving “loose” gays around. As Trites argues, the emphasis in Block’s work is not on gay people or gay sex. Rather, “it is the power of discourse to determine these characters’ sense of sexuality and even sense of self that is most likely to affect the adolescent reader” (*Dis-turbing* 114). In Block’s world, all genders find perfect, transcendent partners, but the narrative tension derives from breaking rules for gender normative behavior, which her characters find more restricting than those regarding sexual object choice. Being gay is something Block’s characters take in stride, but violating gender norms disturbs both the violator and their social world. Weetzie worries about being mistaken for a boy (26), and Dirk works on seeming masculine so he won’t get beaten up, a fate not reserved for queers, since “almost all the boys who were treated this way really did like girls” (380), but for those boys who are unsuccessfully, unconvincingly masculine. Though some of Block’s gay characters experience a coming-out so trouble free that it *must* be a joke on some level, and even those who face hardship reach the telos of “happily ever after,” the problem of having to conform to gender norms even when they don’t fit well adds a level of tension to all her adolescent characters, both queer and not.

Where Are All the Fantasy Lesbians?

One final trope Block shares with her fantasy predecessors is that her gay characters are men. Research shows that even as offerings in the gay YA category multiply, the proportion of male to female queer folks holds steady at 2 to 1 (Lobban xv), and in fantasy fiction, the imbalance is even greater. Titles like *Sword of the Guardian* (Merry Shannon, 2006) and *The Elemental Logic Saga* (Laurie Marks, 2000, 2004) are lesbian-centered epic fantasies, but they court a more mature audience, if only because sex happens in them such that you

can actually tell what's going on. True, epic fantasy is male-heavy across the board, but female heroes are becoming commonplace, especially for an adolescent audience. Tamora Pierce, Patricia C. Wrede, and China Miéville are notable examples of this emerging genre. Children's and Young Adult high fantasy from C.S. Lewis to Lloyd Alexander to Brian Jacques has often contained female characters, but they have always been part of a profoundly male world. Increasingly, female heroes don't even bother to mention the men who are not there.

Perhaps this continued male domination of queer YA fantasy has to do with the gender norm struggles described in *Weetzie Bat*. For teens today, being gay is ok, but being weird isn't. Like in *Weetzie*, contemporary high-school students experience harassment for gender-norm violations more often than for minority sexual orientations. And women in epic fantasy are generally tough, assertive and belligerent. Knighthood, quests, and suspense all require it. Therefore, they are outside comfortable gender norms, which may make lesbian heroes too close to the stereotype to be fun, or fantasy. Add to this dissonance that fantasy works because we're trained to read it. We learn, for example, that queer worlds may be present in disguise, so we can laugh at ourselves and at the convention when the disguise is practically transparent. Further, since YA fiction usually privileges the tragic and ironic over the romantic and comic (Fuoss 161), while fantasy fiction does the opposite, male lovers may fit within both genres more easily because of their supposed distance from duties like reproduction, combined with their historical link to entertainment and irony via theater.

Whatever the reason, queer YA fantasy fiction draws from both fantasy and YA traditions to generate an audience, both queer and straight. Though the queer characters are sweet, nostalgic, partnered, and practically all male, they are a part of the landscape. The deliberate, exaggerated, parodic attitudes these texts take towards the regulation of queer sexuality make the overarching cultural regulation of sexuality visible and therefore escapable through narrative, humor, or fantasy. These novels work by containing homosexuality without naming it, and this covert queerness fits the demands of the YA market. Teen readers know gay folks when they see them, but if queer love dares not speak its name, then parents, publishers, and politicians are fooled. Further, slash fan fiction would be no fun to write if

the characters were already gay, and masquerades wouldn't work if you had nothing to hide. Fantasy fiction with coded or limited gay characters feeds adolescent readers real-world need for boundaries *and* their desire to control the languages and terms of their own identity.

Notes

1. This title is from an "American Voices" section in *The Onion*. The "comments" form a humorous gloss on this article's issues. "Wow, I hadn't heard that. I've been really busy lately not caring about the sexual preferences of fictional people." And "Dumbledore? I always figured the gay ones were Harry, Draco Malfoy, Hermione, Ron, Hagrid, Dudley Dursely, Ptolemy, Morgana, and Professor Snape." And finally, "Hey, that wasn't supposed to come out yet. Incloseto putbacko!" ("Rowling").
2. This sentence is part of Chabon's reexamination of genre fiction, in which he argues that all fiction follows rules, but critics only see the rules that bind genre fiction, and do not see (a) the rules that bind "literature" or (b) genre fiction's habit of adapting the rules to say something not contained by them.
3. See Brown p. 128, O'Keefe p. 20, and other sources.
4. See also Barry Weller's reading of *The Once and Future King*, in which he argues that Lancelot's bond with Arthur is the relationship ruined by adultery (233), and that the question White's novel asks is how much homoeroticism can be presented without losing its sacred idealism.
5. *Annie On My Mind*, the classic lesbian love story by Nancy Garden, has been banned repeatedly since its publication in 1982. It was literally burned in Olathe, Kansas in 1993 ("Censorship" 26) and it has a long history of being removed from school library shelves.
6. Cart and Jenkins document an increase in gay-themed YA novels in the 1990s (82). Christine Jenkins tabulates an increase in this fiction from 1.9 titles per year between 1969 and 1984 to 7.6 titles per year between 1992 and 1997 (301).
7. This paragraph (indeed, this whole essay) would not have been possible without the help of my two daughters. Leah and Emma read widely and queerly, and have great memories. They vetted many books for me, and served as fact checkers. Thanks. I could do nothing without you.
8. Michael Warner describes and analyzes this perverse, improper quality of queerness, which he believes is threatened by contemporary gay and lesbian focus on normalcy. Queer people, he argues, "directly eroticize participation in the public world of their privacy ... in which one's sexuality finds an answering romance not just in one other, but in the world of others... Publicness can have little of the sense of accomplishment or world making so long as it is the expression of privilege and conformity, so long as its putative wildness is compromised by the banality of normal heterosexuality" (179).
9. In *Rainbow Boys*, hook-ups and casual encounters lead directly to guilt, pain, and HIV. In contrast, when Nelson tries to lose his virginity, he is told, "You want it to be with someone you really care about" (Sanchez 118).
10. Fan fiction and slash have been researched extensively since Jenkins published his book, especially since the internet has transformed both its production and accessibility. But my focus here is on the blurred line it creates between readers and writers. Since the conventions of the genre are so easily identified and manipulated, fans can "do," as well as read, fantasy.

11. As Pugh and Wallace ask, in the update they published after Rowling outed Dumbledore, if he's gay, why did that never come up in the novels, when there was ample space and precedent? ("Postscript" 191). One possible answer is provided by Tosenberger when she observes that Rowling herself acknowledges fan's role in writing that material. Within the covers of Rowling's books, any gayness Dumbledore exhibits is apolitical and non-sexual. But Rowling's texts do not exist in isolation, and fan texts and contexts are an integral part of the Potter narrative... she knew her characters would be "slashed," and that a gay community, history, and eroticism would be available to interested readers without her having to write it.
12. Number and age of readers is always hard to estimate, especially with "cross-over" texts, but Thomas and Barr, in their bibliography of popular series fiction for 6th–12th graders include at least seven series by Lackey. Interestingly, their descriptions never mention the gay protagonists.
13. For example, from *Booklist*: "Lackey's homosexual protagonist, is the last of Valdemar's Herald-Mages, who is devastated when his lover is killed in a blood feud" (Green 1783).
14. Though longer than Lackey's books, these qualify as Young Adult novels. They tell a coming-of-age story, include highly romanticized, off-screen sex, and are regularly reviewed in *Kliatt Young Adult Paperback Book Guide* (1997, vol. 31, p. 2 reviews *Stalking Darkness*, while 1999, vol. 33, p. 25 reviews *Traitor's Moon*). Flewelling's subsequent series (*Bone Doll's Twin*, set in the same world, many years before *Nightrunner*) is receiving more attention, and drawing reviews in *Voice of Youth Advocates* and *Booklist* as her popularity, and literary skill, increases.
15. Though *Traitor's Moon* includes a visit to the Aurënfäie homeland, during which many other faie characters are introduced, none become central, or really have personalities beyond diplomatic usefulness.

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