

daisy lame

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Queer-ing Up Kid-Lit

When sci-fi and fantasy author Tessa Gratton started selling their¹ first book in 2007, publisher after publisher rejected it. “It would get really, really close,” they state, “until the publisher would say ‘no, not this,’ or ‘no, it’s not quite right’” (Gratton). The young-adult² (YA) book, *Blood Magic*, contained integral genderqueer³ elements—the main character, Silla, possessed her brother, Reese’s, body and was forced to reckon with her boyfriend about the not-so-cisgender circumstance they found themselves in (Gratton). After a difficult conversation with their agent, Gratton reluctantly removed “90% of the genderqueer[ness] from the book,” retaining only a few hints; Silla watches Reese die and deals with that trauma, but stays in her own body. “Almost immediately,” they say, the book sold at auction—meaning multiple publishing houses wanted it—for a high price. Despite not having direct confirmation, Gratton feels that, given the timing and circumstances, the major publishing houses had a “narratively obvious” anti-queer bias for the stories they told (Gratton).

The YA publishing industry’s reluctance to release queer⁴ books—especially trans, non-binary, and genderqueer books—impacts readers and authors alike. In a 2020 article, non-binary writer Ray Stoeve states, “Well into the mid-2000s, queer [YA] fiction was a cis person’s game... The T in LGBTQ existed as an abstract concept” (Stoeve, “Trans Representation”). For trans and non-binary readers, this reluctance means an underrepresentation of their thoughts and emotions on the page, causing invalidation. Anna-Marie McLemore, a queer author, says this lack of representation ““made [them] hesitant to come out”” (qtd. in Stoeve, “Trans Representation”). For writers, this means feeling unable to have their stories told the way they want; Gratton didn’t publish an overtly queer book until 2016—seven years after selling their debut novel (Gratton).

Gratton’s reckoning with the gender binary comes from a deeply personal place. They grew aware of their gender non-conformity during their late-teens, but didn’t start defining themselves as genderqueer until grad school, where they studied queer theory and public policy (Gratton). While studying with the backdrop of the Iraq War, Gratton realized direct politics was “borderline toxic” (Gratton). Still wanting to make the world a better place, they asked themselves, ““What made me this way... what made me want to fight to make the world better, question the social order?”” (Gratton). When Gratton realized the answer was the books they had

¹ Gratton uses she/they/any pronouns. For the sake of consistency, this paper refers to them with the singular “they.”

² “Young-adult” refers to novels meant for readers 12–18 (though many older readers read them).

³ “Genderqueer” refers to an individual who doesn’t conform to the traditional male-female gender binary.

⁴ While this paper focuses on trans and genderqueer books, many of my sources use the terms “queer,” “LGBTQ,” “LGBT,” and more interchangeably. To not misconstrue the meaning of my sources, I use the terms they use.

read as a kid and teenager, they pivoted their goal from a career in politics to a career in writing (Gratton). Key to this goal was including characters and storylines that represented their struggle with gender and queerness, hoping to highlight marginalized and undertold stories that would've helped them as a younger person (Gratton). Gratton's 2023 middle-grade⁵ (MG) novel *The High Republic: Quest for Planet X*, for example, includes Sky Graf, a young non-binary character who explicitly wrestles and copes with gender dysphoria (Gratton). Reiterating the classic feminist mantra, "The personal is political," Gratton emphasizes that their writing stems from their politics and needs, as well as young queer kids' needs (Gratton).

Since the mid-2000s, queer representation in YA and MG publishing has increased; Stoeve notes in a 2025 article there are now one hundred nineteen traditionally published YA books with trans protagonists or side characters, as opposed to thirty-three in 2020 (Stoeve, "Trans and Nonbinary"). In Gratton's experience, much of this work comes from organizations like We Need Diverse Books, which make it easier for readers to access queer fiction and for marginalized authors to get their stories published; they state, "[these organizations] drag[ked] kid lit⁶ kicking and screaming" to find marginalized authors with important stories to tell (Gratton). However, genderqueer (and overall gender-expansive) representation on the page still has a long way to go. A 2017 research paper by Heather Moulason-Sandy et al. finds a majority of LGBT fiction focuses on white gay males (1). Further, in 2024, 78% of trans characters in YA and MG books were white (Stoeve, "Trans and Nonbinary"). Queer writer Kacen Callender also notes a lack of trans feminine voices, arguing because of their extreme marginalization, "it's...likely that they aren't being given...the chances that everyone else has" (qtd. in Stoeve, "Trans Representation"). More representation for non-white and non-cis members of the LGBTQ community is necessary to validate the thoughts and concerns of young queer readers, many of whom suffer anxiety, depression, and systemic invalidation.

While publishing houses have grown somewhat more willing to highlight queer authors and stories, trans and queer books have become an overt target for conservative politicians. Queer and trans people (and especially kid-lit authors) are frequently accused of grooming children, and often face death or rape threats which are disproportionately targeted at BIPOC members of the writing community (Gratton). As trans and genderqueer people face heightened violence, conservative parents and activists disproportionately target LGBTQ books. In an NBC News article, Jo Yurcaba writes, "More than half the books banned during the last school year featured or were about people of color or members of the LGBTQ community" (Yocurba). Book bans occur when schools and libraries remove books with certain content, often from marginalized groups or diverse political perspectives, because of protest from activist groups, parents, or politicians. As anti-queer and trans rhetoric increases, Gratton says these book bans "specifically hit...queer and BIPOC authors of YA and [MG] harder than anyone else" (Gratton).

⁵ Middle-grade" refers to novels meant for readers 8–12 years old.

⁶ "Kid lit" is an umbrella term for YA, MG, and other book demographics aimed at younger audiences.

Specifically, the concept that queer representation in books can make kids queer, and that that is the goal of authors, is at the center of the current push to ban queer books (Gratton). When the threat of book bans looms, they state, publishers are afraid to market YA and MG books featuring queer characters or storylines, causing these books to underperform (Gratton). Publishers then make the conclusion that queer books don't sell, when in reality they aren't given the same chance as books without queer elements (Gratton). Even if an author's book isn't banned, the hostile culture around LGBTQ books can mean readers and publishers aren't willing to give those stories a chance, causing a lack of queer representation without explicitly anti-queer policies in place.

Gratton also highlights how marginalized authors find community and support each other, often through back-channels and tight-knit communities. Trans and genderqueer authors formed these groups throughout the mid-to-late-2000s due to political necessity, when they “had to be more discrete about their identities” (Gratton). Blogs, message boards, and vibrant pockets of larger social-media sites like Livejournal and Facebook hosted writing-related conversations between underrepresented authors from myriad backgrounds (Gratton). Before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, authors also attended organized retreats and workshops⁷ dedicated to lifting up marginalized writers and bringing to light the unique struggles they face (Gratton). These support systems, however, have recently taken a hit—Gratton points to Elon Musk recently acquiring X (formerly Twitter) as an example of how these communities are dismantled.⁸ “Safeties that were in place,” they state, “were systematically removed,” indicating Musk likely targeted marginalized online communities. The Twitter (X) writing community may have been “incredibly argumentative and divisive” in its heyday, but it was a community nonetheless that has now been utterly dissolved (Gratton). While Gratton believes that the strongest communities are now on Discord and Slack, they also note that these communities “are more fractured and swiftly changing,” adding that their own closest communities are simply group chats. Now that safe, queer-specific communities are harder to find and smaller in size, Gratton wonders about the effect on the new generation of marginalized authors lacking support (Gratton).

Despite recent complications, Gratton acknowledges publishing queer stories as a genderqueer author is easier today than when they started (Gratton). Their 2025 YA book, *The Acolyte: The Crystal Crown*, features non-binary antagonist Lionine Graf and genderfluid character Rhos Arthyst in prominent roles (Gratton). Gratton's recent books were mostly franchise work for *Star Wars*, and they say Lucasfilm Publishing was “nothing but supportive” of their queer storylines (Gratton). Gratton even mentioned how they'd like to revisit the story of *Blood Magic* one day and potentially revise it to its original, genderqueer state. I personally have read all of Gratton's *Star Wars* novels and short stories, and these stories were a huge support

⁷ Many of these retreats were put on by Madcap Retreats, a writer's organization owned by Natalie C. Parker (Gratton's wife), and in collaboration with the organization We Need Diverse Books.

⁸ Gratton, for example, migrated from X (formerly Twitter) to BlueSky (Gratton).

during a difficult time in my life. Navigating coming out as trans to close friends and family, being closeted at school, and wrestling with a complex wider political situation, I knew I could find comfort in the unabashed queerness of Gratton's stories. While their hopes for the immediate future of queer and trans publishing aren't high, Gratton reiterates that marginalized authors have always tried to make their voices heard (Gratton). Ideally, they state, "there will be inroads into currently popular [YA] genres...like romantasy," which doesn't have a big queer or non-white book yet (Gratton). Gratton emphasizes that their books are written to make sure kids know "there are options for them, there is hope, [and] there is a whole world out here with queer and trans communities" (Gratton). Regardless of the ever-changing publishing and political landscapes, Gratton continues to write from the heart and "queer it up."

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