The “problem novel” made its first appearance in U.S. young adult literature during the late 1960s. Although young adult novels have always centered on various life problems as experienced by young adults, critics trace the origin of the “new realism” in teen fiction to the period from 1967 through 1969, during which S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, Ann Head’s *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*, Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman*, and other pivotal titles were published. These young adult novels were characterized by candor, unidealized characters and settings, colloquial and realistic language, and plots that portrayed realistic problems faced by contemporary young adults that did not necessarily find resolution in a happy ending.¹

Homosexuality and the social prejudice against those who identify as gay or lesbian was one of the themes to emerge at this time. John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) was the first young adult novel to specifically address homosexuality. In the book, thirteen-year-old Davy describes his growing friendship with a classmate, Altschuler. One afternoon the boys wrestle and end up kissing. Davy reacts with fear and avoidance, but the two finally reconcile, agreeing that the incident won’t be repeated and their friendship will continue. Although Donovan’s treatment of the sexual encounter is vague and brief, some reviewers in 1969 found the book remarkable and ground breaking. Other reviewers worried that it “might arouse in the unconcerned unnecessary interest or alarm or both.”²

In the years from 1969 through 1992, approximately sixty young adult novels with gay/lesbian characters or themes appeared in the United States, and most reviewers are no longer
so surprised—or so troubled—by them. While several studies and articles have documented the existence and content of these titles, most writing on this subject has focused on the early years of this body of literature or on a few selected titles. As yet, few researchers have examined the full range of titles published in the years from 1969 through 1992 or traced content changes over time.\(^3\)

Although each title is an individually authored work that can, and should, be judged as such, these books, taken as a whole, may be examined as a body of literature representing choices made by writers, editors, and publishers as the appropriate portrayal of gay/lesbian characters and themes in books for a young adult audience. Young adults have many questions and much misinformation about homosexuality, and reading is one of the few private ways for adolescents to gather information about this subject. What images and messages about gays and lesbians do these books present to teenagers? Who are the gay/lesbian people and what are their lives like? What happens to teens who think (or wonder) if they are gay? What is it like to be in love with someone of the same sex? What if your friend, or your sibling, or your parent is gay? In looking at a time span of almost twenty-five years, one may gain a historical understanding of what has and has not changed in the explicit and implicit messages to several generations of young adult readers.

The following pages describe some of the information contained in the sixty young adult novels published from 1969 through 1992 that I have identified as containing significant gay/lesbian content and/or themes, using available bibliographies, lists contained in earlier studies, and reviews in *Booklist*, *SLJ* and *VOYA* (see Appendix A). This chronological examination of the books’ portrayals of gay/lesbian characters and their contexts focuses on information about gay/lesbian people, both as individuals and in relationships, and on gender
representation and narrative distance. It also identifies some gender and narrative patterns that have yet to be explored in this subgenre of young adult novels.

In order to focus on novelistic presentations specifically aimed at American teen audiences, I have limited my study to books available in the United States and published and marketed as young adult novels, and thus have not included any of the many adult fiction titles read by, but not marketed to, young adults. Most are from mainstream presses, although a few small press books, including several from Canada and Great Britain, have been included if they met the above requirements.

As may be seen in Appendix A, the rate of production of this body of literature has roughly doubled over the years, with approximately half (thirty-one) of the books published in the sixteen years from 1969 through 1984, and the rest (twenty-nine) published in the following eight years, from 1985 through 1992. In seeking to examine historical trends within this group of sixty novels, I have used these two chronological halves—the earlier 1969-84 group of thirty-one titles and the more recent 1985-92 group of twenty-nine titles—to describe the changes (or lack thereof) in this body of literature over time.

Demographics of Gay/Lesbian People—Race, Class, Location, Vocation

According to both the earlier and the more recent novels, most gay/lesbian people are white and middle-class. Only three of the sixty books portray people of color as gay or lesbian, all of them African-American. In Guy’s Ruby, the female protagonist and another young woman become involved in a short-lived romantic relationship; in Woodson’s The Dear One, a lesbian couple are part of the young female protagonist’s extended family; and in Rees’s Milkman’s on His Way, a minor role is played by a black gay male with whom the white male protagonist becomes
involved at the end of the book. All other gay or lesbian characters are white, including those in Childress’s *Those Other People*, the only other novel besides *Ruby* and *The Dear One* written by a person of color. Gay/lesbian working-class protagonists appear in two books by and about American women (*Ruby* and Garden’s *Annie on My Mind*), and three by and about British men (Rees’s *In the Tent*, *The Milkman’s on His Way*, and *The Colour of His Hair*).

Though most books take place within a white, middle-class community, the geographic location of this setting has changed somewhat over time. In the earlier group of books, rural areas and small towns were common settings, as were camps and boarding schools. Few books in the more recent group feature such settings; none are set in camps or boarding schools, and most are set in urban or suburban locations. Urban settings include New York, Phoenix, and Tucson, while the suburban settings have generic names such as Wilmont, Norwell, or Oak Grove. Like the locales for movies and television programs marketed to teens, the books’ settings tend to reflect popular culture images of teen life.

An interest in some sort of creative art is commonly portrayed as a part of a gay/lesbian person’s interests. Five books have a high school or summer stock theater setting, and the majority of the gay/lesbian adult characters work in creative or arts-related fields (including visual arts, interior design, writing, acting, museum work, art or antique dealing, and woodworking). Those in other fields often display a strong interest in the arts, such as a geologist who is an opera buff (*Meyer’s Elliott and Win*), or a surgeon who is a gourmet cook (*L’Engle’s A House Like a Lotus*). The other major occupational field is that of teaching, with one elementary and eleven secondary school teachers among the thirty-plus adults with identifiable jobs. Although gay/lesbian teachers commonly lost their jobs in the earlier books, this occurs only rarely in the more recent ones.
Gender and Appearance

One of the most noticeable patterns in the young adult novelistic portrayal of gay/lesbian people is the predominance of males, both as teens and as adults. This trend has become even more pronounced in recent years. Of the sixty books in this sample, roughly one-quarter (sixteen) portray lesbians or female teens who are concerned about their own sexual orientation, while three-quarters (forty-four) portray males. The proportion of books including females dropped from twelve out of thirty-one (39 percent) in the 1969-84 group to four out of twenty-nine (14 percent) in the 1985-92 group, while the proportion of males grew from 61 percent (nineteen) to 86 percent (twenty-five). (See Figure 1.)

![Figure 1: Gender of Character with Gay/Lesbian Issue/Identity](image)

Physical appearance is a standard aspect of characterization in young adult novels, with most characters’ looks falling somewhere on a continuum between average-looking and
beautiful/handsome. Young adult novels portray gay males and lesbians at various points on that continuum, but the few considered exceptionally attractive tend to differ according to gender. Beautiful lesbians, particularly those in the 1969-84 group, tend to be associated with pain, either for themselves or for those around them. Some are seductive, but lose interest once a conquest is made. Others are tragic beauties whose attractiveness seems to mark them for incurable diseases or brutal rapes. Handsome gay men, on the other hand, are neither evil nor doomed, and whatever pain they might cause others is unintentional. In remarkably similar plots, two novels (Colman’s *Happily Ever After* and Rinaldi’s *The Good Side of My Heart*) portray boys who are loved by the female narrators. When the boys come out, both narrators react with dismay and anger at the “injustice” of a gay male being attractive but unattainable, as when Rinaldi’s female narrator laments, “All that handsomeness. All that masculinity wasted. I wanted to cry.”

Eventually, both relationships turn into friendships, but the idea that good looks are wasted if the person possessing them isn’t heterosexual is never questioned. In addition, women are shown falling for gay men, but men are never shown falling for lesbians. It appears that a man without a woman is attractive and valued, but a woman without a man is not.

**Gay/Lesbian Teen Characters**

Many of the novels include teenagers who have (or are contemplating) same-sex love relationships, some as protagonists and some as secondary characters. In all, the books contain forty young men and twenty young women who have same-sex attractions or concerns. Slightly over half of the young men (twenty-two) have some type of same-sex romantic encounter or relationship, and slightly less than half (eighteen) do not, through either personal choice or lack of opportunity. Almost all of the young women (nineteen) have some type of same-sex
relationship in the course of the book. Portrayals have changed over time, with teen same-sex couples becoming both less common and more stable. While there are seven male and seven female couples in the 1969-84 group, the 1985-92 group contains only four male and two female couples. Of teen couples in the earlier group, half (two male, five female) separate, the five female couples because of one member’s decision to end the relationship, the two male couples because of the death of one member. All of the teen couples in the more recent group (four male, two female) remain together. As noted above, almost all of single teens (eighteen or nineteen) are male. Some are content with their single status, while others are actively (or wistfully) looking for partners. It appears that young men have greater life-style flexibility than young women, since males may lead contented autonomous lives, while female autonomy is rarely pictured as an option.

Two contradictory social stereotypes of gay/lesbian people center on their level of sexual experience. One says that gay people are very promiscuous and think about sex constantly. This is usually applied to males. The other says that since same-sex couples are physically similar, there is little they can do together sexually. This is usually applied to females. Young adult novels in general tend to tread a fine line between general and specific when describing sexual activity, and details are often foggy beyond the first kiss. While this lack of sexual detail is evident throughout most young adult literature, fictional gays and lesbians seem to have extremely limited sex lives. Donovan tells the reader that Davy and Altschuler kiss, but the rest of their activity is merely alluded to as “it” and “that” when the boys talk. Charles, in Holland’s Man without a Face, says, “I didn’t know what was happening to me until it happened.”5 In Scoppettone’s Trying Hard to Hear You, Jeff and Phil are seen hugging once. In Scoppettone’s Happy Endings Are All Alike, the deranged narrator Mid spies on Jaret and Peggy and exclaims,
“[B]efore I knew it, before I could believe it, they were doing IT to each other. That’s right, IT. And they really acted like they dug it.”⁶ Even the brash teenager Neil, who begins Mosca’s *All-American Boys* with “I’ve known I was gay since I was thirteen. Does that surprise you? It didn’t me,” draws the veil when he and Paul begin their affair, saying, “He touched my arm. Our kiss was gentle. As for what happened afterwards, well, there are parts of everyone’s life that are not open for public inspection.”⁷

These last two books are particularly interesting in matters of explicitness because they both contain detailed descriptions of violent assaults—Jaret’s beating and rape fills seven pages, and Paul’s bashing and Neil’s kung fu revenge take five. As MPAA ratings reflect, it is thought safer for teenagers to view violence than sex, a standard that appears to hold true for young adult novels as well. Although some critics complain of “excessive violence,” far more attack sexual explicitness, and any expression of homosexuality is automatically labeled “too explicit.” The majority of these books contain no description of any sexual interaction—or even any physical contact—between two lovers of the same sex. The effect of this absence is to either trivialize or mystify gay sexuality. If readers are looking for sexual information, they get very little.

**Gay/Lesbian Adult Characters**

Twenty-five novels contain gay/lesbian adults ranging in age from early twenties to mid-fifties. Older adults are sometimes portrayed as aware and tolerant of others’ homosexuality, but are never shown as lesbian/gay themselves. Gay and lesbian adults in more recent titles tend to be more comfortable with themselves and more likely to be in couples than those in earlier titles. A total of eighteen (twelve male, six female) adult couples appear in these books: six (two male, four female) in the 1969-84 group, and twelve (ten male, two female) in the 1985-92 group. In
the earlier novels, adult male couples are infrequent and unfortunate. The two couples suffer because of their relationship, one through discriminatory job loss (in Bargar’s *What Happened to Mr. Forster?*) and one through self-hate so severe that one member of the couple murders the other to avoid disclosure (in Hulse’s *Just the Right Amount of Wrong*). In the more recent novels, adult male couples are more frequent and relatively more fortunate. Of a total of ten adult male couples, seven survive, while three face the death of one partner: two from AIDS and one from gay bashing. Lesbian adult relationships are less evident but fare somewhat better in these novels. All six of the adult lesbian couples survive to the end of the story, although two couples in the earlier novels have significant problems. In Garden’s *Annie on My Mind*, both members of a couple experience discriminatory job loss, while in L’Engle’s *A House Like a Lotus*, one member of a couple faces a terminal illness.

A small number of single gay or lesbian adults also appear in these books: four (two male, two female) in the earlier books, and seven (all male) in the more recent books. Both of the single women appear in St. George’s *Call Me Margo* and are actually former lovers, one of whom is Margo’s unhappy, saintly, and athletic tennis instructor, while the other is Margo’s unhappy, unpleasant, and physically disabled English teacher, thus reflecting a double-sided stereotype common to many marginalized groups that depicts them as either superhumanly virtuous or subhumanly malign. The single gay men are more numerous and varied in affect. The brooding Mr. Rochester-like recluse in Holland’s *The Man without a Face*, the father and children’s book author in Rees’s *Out of the Winter Gardens*, and the handsome art dealer uncle and verbal artiste in Koertge’s *The Arizona Kid* exemplify the range of characterizations. They are, however, more likely than gay male couples to face significant misfortune; of the nine
portrayed, four lead contented, though occasionally lonely, lives, while five die, face death, or are gay bashed in the course of the book.

**Gay/Lesbian Characters—Problems and Patterns**

Several patterns emerge in the portrayals of teen and adult gay/lesbian characters in young adult novels. Notable, along with the ongoing and growing lack of lesbians noted earlier, is the near-absence of any single lesbians. There appears to be a continuing resistance on the part of authors and/or editors to view independent females as other than in a temporary state (if young) or other than unhappy (if adult). Males, on the other hand, appear to be capable of leading autonomous lives. Next, there is the endangered status of gay males. In the earlier books, seven die and one is gay bashed; in the more recent books, five die or are dying, and three are gay bashed. Many of these characters acknowledge the stress they feel in leading their lives in a potentially dangerous world, but, with a few notable exceptions, there is a great deal of attention focused on the difficulties of being a member of a minority group, with little attention paid to the strategies and skills minority group members develop in order to survive. The novels that do raise such issues tend to be those that place the gay/lesbian characters within the context of a community of friends and either biological or chosen family.

Many of the gay/lesbian characters in these books, particularly those who are young, lead isolated and lonely lives. Given the assumed (and often actual) course of gay people’s lives, this may seem logical and realistic. Certainly the pressure of living in the average secondary school’s atmosphere of exaggerated heterosexuality and homophobia contributes to the isolation of non-conforming students. Indeed, such pressure has been identified as one of the significant factors in the comparatively high rate of gay/lesbian teen suicide attempts. In autobiographical accounts
by gay and lesbian adults, authors who identified as gay or lesbian as teens often describe several stages through which they moved: first, becoming aware of their same-sex attractions; second, dealing in various ways with the difficulties arising from isolation and heterosexism; and, finally, acting to end their isolation by seeking a social milieu of gay/lesbian people and their friends as they move toward adulthood. Most adult lives are sustained by a network of family and friends, and there is no reason to suppose that this would not be the case for adults who are gay or lesbian. This reality is rarely reflected in these novels. The four books by British author David Rees, Barbara Wersba’s *Crazy Vanilla*, and Ron Koertge’s *The Arizona Kid* are notable for their inclusion of a gay community. Most of the other novels fail even to hint at the existence of a larger community of gay/lesbian people and their friends. The message in these books is that it is important to be true to oneself and to be accepting of one’s own, and others’, sexual preference, but that part of what a gay/lesbian person has to accept is loneliness and the absence of a peer group, both in adolescence and in adulthood.

AIDS became an acknowledged societal concern in the early 1980s, and books for young adults containing AIDS information began to appear in 1985. Several of these books have been young adult fiction, but few have included gay people. The earliest novels were M. E. Kerr’s *Night Kites* (1986) and Gloria Miklowitz’s *Goodbye, Tomorrow* (1987). In the first, the person with AIDS is gay, and in the second, straight, but both characters suffer discrimination from nearly everyone around them. In more recent books—Koertge’s *The Arizona Kid*, Levy’s *Rumors and Whispers*, Rees’s *The Colour of His Hair*, and Durant’s *When Heroes Die*—gay people with AIDS face discrimination but are also supported by their friends. Given the difficulties that people with AIDS face, it is realistic to portray discrimination, but it is now equally realistic to portray AIDS support networks.
Gay/Lesbian YA Novels—Narrative Distance and Gender

A comparison of earlier novels with more recent novels shows that some elements have changed, while others have remained constant. One aspect of the novels’ portrayals that has changed strikingly is the distance between the protagonist/narrator and the novel’s gay/lesbian content. Since the mid 1980s, the trend within this body of literature has been away from homosexuality-as-main-issue, and toward treating gay issues as either a subplot or a fact about a secondary character that is stated but not commented upon at any length. Narrators have gone from dealing with their own possible gay identity to dealing with the gay/lesbian identity of their friends, siblings, relatives, or parents (see Figure 2). In eighteen of the thirty-one novels published from 1969 through 1984, the issue of gay/lesbian identity is one that affects another character, commonly an adult in the role of parent, teacher, or mentor. By contrast, gay/lesbian identity is a personal concern of the protagonist/narrator in only six of twenty-nine novels published from 1985 through 1992. This trend works both to broaden and to narrow the scope of gay/lesbian YA fiction. On the one hand, more recent novels include gay and lesbian characters in a greater range of relationships to the teen protagonist than appeared in earlier years. On the other hand, most of the protagonists in the 1985-92 books are heterosexual, which may limit teen reader response by placing the gay/lesbian character consistently at a remove from the protagonist.
FIGURE 2: Role of Character with Gay/Lesbian Issue/Identity

Of the twenty-four books dealing with the narrator/protagonist’s identity, fifteen books feature male narrators (eleven from 1969-84, four from 1985-92) and nine books feature female narrators (seven from 1969-84, two from 1985-92). However, in the thirty-six books containing gay/lesbian non-protagonist characters, the protagonist’s gender appears to have a significant relationship to that of the gay/lesbian character. In the eighteen books with female protagonists, eleven of the gay/lesbian characters are male and seven are female; in the eighteen books with male protagonists, eighteen of the gay characters are male and none are female. The female narrators in these books have a variety of relationships with gay males, from daughter to sister to best friend to ex-girlfriend. The male narrators, on the other hand, have no relationships with lesbians, as sons, brothers, friends, or ex-boyfriends. This absence of any connection between male protagonists and lesbians is not a reflection of reality. In real life, for example, gay parents of both genders have children of both genders. In young adult novels, however, gay fathers may
have sons or daughters, but lesbian mothers have daughters only. This odd and persistent omission may reflect an outdated editorial assumption as to the inherent indifference of all teenage males (as protagonists or readers) to all females—as mothers, siblings, cousins, friends, or colleagues—who are not romantically interested in males. One would hope that in the future, young adult authors and editors might give their readers—and young men—credit for a broader vision.

Still another related gender concern is that of the lack of interaction between gay male and lesbian characters. This sex segregation could reflect an actual lack of gender integration within some gay/lesbian communities, but it must be noted that none of the sixty novels in this group contain both gay male and lesbian characters except in moments so fleeting as to be nearly nonexistent, such as the passing mention of Bonny’s foster parents as a female couple in Ure’s *The Other Side of the Fence*, a novel featuring a young man coming to terms with his gay identity. Gender segregation plus assumptions about people with AIDS may be seen in the fact that none of the books containing lesbian characters make any mention of AIDS.

**Conclusion and Future Directions**

While the difficulties and isolation faced by gay/lesbian characters in these books must not be discounted, the possibility of friendship and connection between friends of different sexual orientations is also portrayed. For example, two young adult novels, both published in 1990, feature straight male protagonists who must come to terms with the gay identity of a close male friend. Although both are recent, when read together they illustrate the range of novelistic protagonist/narrator stances taken over the last twenty-five years. In Joyce Sweeney’s *Face the Dragon*, Paul comes out to his friend Eric as they walk on a deserted beach:
“I’m different from you….For a while I wasn’t even sure about this, but lately, and especially after last night…I’m just not very interested in…girls.”

It was so sudden, Eric didn’t get it. “Well, you probably…” Then he did get it.

“What do you mean?” he asked warily.

Paul wouldn’t look at him now. “You know what I mean.”

“You’re crazy. I’ve known you all your life. I’d know if you were like that.”

“How would you know? If I never said anything, you wouldn’t know. You just said you didn’t have a clue how I felt about that stuff. Well, now I’m telling you. When I think about that stuff, I think about…the wrong people….”

“Well, if I were you, I’d try to keep my options open. I’m saying it because you’re talking about something that’s risky and dangerous and makes your whole life a million times harder than it has to be. So if there is a way out, I think you should look for it.”

In Paul Walker’s *The Method*, Mitch comes out to Albie while the two sit in a crowded gay restaurant. Albie reacts with laughter, to which Mitch responds:

“I’m sorry that it makes you nervous, Albie. But I want you to know. I’m gay. I’m queer. I’m a faggot. I’m a homosexual. This is not a joke. This is my life.”

Albie…turned toward Mitch and asked, “Why are you telling me this?”

“I need to.”

“How do you know? I mean, about being…you know…gay?”
“I know. Believe me. Albie, there’s something I want to ask you, and I
want you to be completely honest. Will you do that? Are we still friends?”

Albie reached out and covered Mitch’s hand with his own. “You know we are”

Among the most obvious differences in these two treatments of a similar event are those of
setting and of language. Sweeney, unwilling to use what appears to be “the g--- word,” prefers to
describe Paul’s sexual orientation in terms of negatives, while Walker uses a variety of standard
and colloquial terms to express Mitch’s message to Albie, and even allows his protagonist to
show his acceptance though physical contact. One-note portrayals of gay/lesbian characters as
tragic outsiders continue to appear in contemporary young adult fiction, but they are no longer
hegemonic.

There are also areas as yet unexplored in YA fiction. As noted earlier, there are
comparatively few books that feature lesbian characters and none that portray lesbians in any
type of relationship with male teen protagonists. Portrayals of people of color as gay or lesbian
are also lacking. There is also the persistent absence of settings that reflect gay/lesbian
communities as they exist throughout the country. Perhaps at some future point a young adult
novel will appear featuring a gay/lesbian protagonist who lives within a network of family and
friends of various orientations and who faces various problems that may or may not touch upon
the protagonist’s sexual identity.

Gaining a historical perspective on this subgenre of young adult fiction can benefit
librarians, teachers, and others who work with young people. An awareness of the strengths and
weaknesses of the literature thus far can aid in the evaluation of current and future young adult
novels featuring gay/lesbian characters and themes using the important criteria of realism, balance, and diversity.

Appendix A

CHRONOLOGICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SIXTY TITLES

Earlier Group—Titles Published 1969-84

1969


1972


1974


1976


Sullivan, Mary W. *What’s This About Pete?* Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

1977


1978


1979

Rees, David. *In the Tent*. Boston: Alyson.

1980


1981


1982


1983


1984


More Recent Group

Titles Published 1985-92

1985


1986


1987


1988


1989


Brett, Catherine. *S. P. Likes A. D.* Toronto: Women’s Pr.


1990
Sweeney, Joyce. _Face the Dragon_. New York: Delacorte.
Walker, Paul Robert. _The Method_. New York: Gulliver/HBJ.

1991
Gleitzman, Morris. _Two Weeks with the Queen_. New York: Putnam.
Greene, Bette. _The Drowning of Stephen Jones_. New York: Bantam.
Woodson, Jacqueline. _The Dear One_. New York: Delacorte.

1992
Durant, Penny Raife. _When Heroes Die_. New York: Atheneum.
Wieler, Diana. _Bad Boy_. New York: Delacorte.

REFERENCES
1. Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, _Literature for Today’s Young Adults_ 3d ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott-Foresman, 1986), 84.

7. Frank Mosca, All-American Boys (Boston: Alyson, 1983), 7, 44.