

# Windows and mirrors: visibility and representation in Australian LGBTQIA+ YA fiction

By Nell Day

## Snapshot

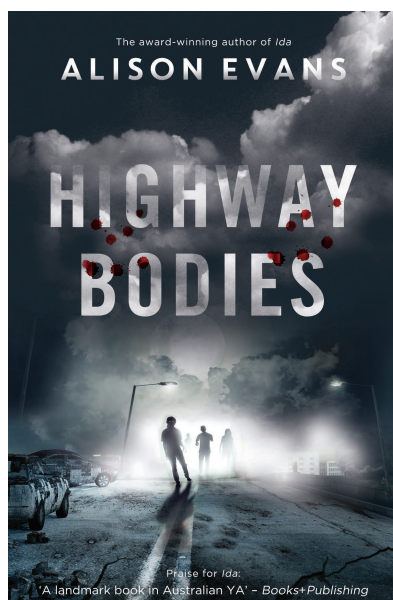
This article, drawing on a panel discussion from the 2018 November SLAV conference, reflects on LGBTQIA+ writing in the current Australian young adult fiction landscape, situated within what has been a strong worldwide movement towards diversity of representation in young adult writing, and explores the ways in which diverse and inclusive collections are of value to young people.

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange... When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Sims Bishop, 1990).

The metaphor of literature as both holding up a mirror to readers' own experiences and identities and offering a window through which to access the experience of others, developed by author and professor of education Rudine Sims Bishop, is a powerful one to guide librarians in purposefully curating diverse and inclusive collections. The idea

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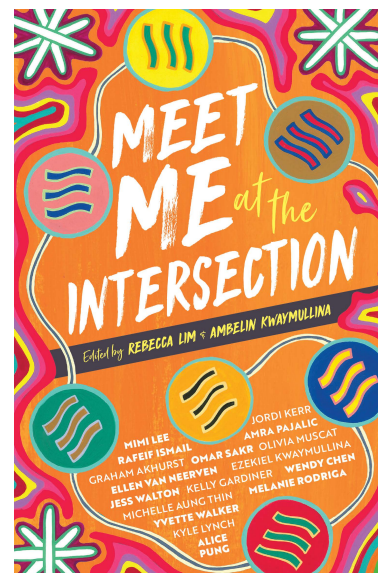
of books as windows and mirrors provides a rationale for diversifying collections across a number of axes of marginalisation: where Sims Bishop's work is largely focussed on cultural diversity, this idea also provides a strong rationale for building collections that represent diversity of genders and sexualities. This article, drawing on a panel discussion from last November's SLAV



conference, reflects on LGBTQIA+ writing in the current Australian young adult fiction landscape, situated within what has been a strong worldwide movement towards diversity of representation in young adult writing, and explores the ways in which diverse and inclusive collections are of value to young people both in affirming their identities and fostering understanding of and empathy for others.

At last year's November SLAV conference, I had the privilege of hosting a discussion between contemporary Australian authors Alison Evans, Jordi Kerr and Jessica Walton, whose collective breadth of knowledge, experience and passion made for a fascinating

conversation. Alison Evans is a zinemaker and the author of the speculative timeslip novel *Ida* (Echo, 2017) and the new queer zombie apocalypse thriller *Highway Bodies* (Echo, 2019). They have also written about **non-binary gender identity** for the Guardian and have a story exploring ‘the friendship side of queerness’ between two non-binary young people in Walker Books’ forthcoming *Kindred* anthology. Jordi Kerr is a writer, zinemaker, and youth literature advocate who has previously worked at the Centre for Youth Literature on projects including the Inky Awards and the Shift Alt Story course for teachers, and is currently a youth development worker supporting LGBTQIA+ young people. They are the author of a beautiful queer shape-shifter story in Fremantle Press’s *Meet Me at the Intersection* anthology as well as of **a hugely informative series of articles** for Archer magazine on queer Australian YA, and their work explores themes around body positivity, fat acceptance, chronic illness, and gender affirmation. Jessica Walton is a teacher, musician and author of works including the children’s picture book *Introducing Teddy* (Bloomsbury, 2016), the heartwarming story of a teddy bear’s journey towards gender affirmation. She contributed a short story about love, chronic pain and fan culture to the *Meet Me at the Intersection* anthology, saying that she ‘wanted to write something fluffy and romantic, because I would have loved that when I was younger’, and recently co-wrote a hilarious and razor-sharp episode focused on disability for the satirical ABC show *Get Krackin’*. The panellists represented an enormous amount of experience, creativity and expertise and were incredibly thoughtful and generous in sharing their knowledge and ideas.



We kicked off the discussion of the importance of LGBTQIA+ representation in YA literature by reflecting on the authors’ own experiences of libraries and library collections as queer-identified young people. Alison Evans recalled their education in the Catholic system and their love of Tamora Pierce’s work, particularly the prevalence of ‘ladies with swords’. They described the extreme difficulty of accessing books with queer stories or characters and the fact that the few books available were American and seemed culturally distant. Their experience with libraries as a young

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queer person was ‘pretty awful because there was no queer stuff that I could find’. Jessica Walton experienced a similar lack of representation: while the school library was a safe space for her when she experienced bullying after her childhood experience of cancer and becoming an amputee, and she

described ‘feeling respected and valued in the library’, she recalled only being able to find one book about childhood illness (*Peeling the Onion* by Wendy Orr) and commented that ‘disability representation was really bad and queer representation was non-existent’. Walton described her first experience of reading a book with queer main characters (*Fingersmith* by Sarah Waters) in her twenties, saying ‘I remember just crying reading it... feeling really angry and bitter that this was the first time I’d read something like that’. Jordi Kerr’s mother was a librarian and they

recalled growing up in libraries 'camped out in the corner of the children's section not finding any queer representation: I have no idea where it was'. Kerr commented that today the situation is 'better, but there is so much space still for things to improve'. They cited the important work of Jenny Pausacker who compiled a **[comprehensive audit of queer Australian YA](#)** in the thirty-year period to 2015, while also noting that during that period there was only one instance of a YA novel published in Australia featuring an intersex character (Alyssa Brugman's *Alex as Well*) suggesting that there are particular groups under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella who still suffer from a lack of visibility in literature.

Furthermore, Kerr underlined the importance of Own Voices literature in building a diverse collection. The hashtag #ownvoices was **[coined by author Corinne Duyvis](#)** to describe books in which 'the protagonist and the author share a marginalised identity'. Kerr explained why this is a useful and important descriptor:

'One of the ways I've sometimes described own voices is a little bit of a backlash to when the We Need Diverse Books movement started, and all of a sudden those who already had access to publishers, who already had a reputation, who already had access to that power and that platform, were suddenly producing stories about diverse characters, and it wasn't necessarily reaching the communities who were needing to share their voices... It's not that other people can't or shouldn't write diverse characters, because the world as it is does need to be represented in the literature that people access, but if you are writing a story where the protagonist is from a minority community and you are writing that particularly with a first-person voice, you are sharing something of that community's experience, and you don't have that lived experience. So if you get it wrong, you don't pay the price of that. And that's one of the things that really bugs me. Own voices is a much shorter way of saying that we need diverse books by diverse people... There's something particularly valuable in own voices books.'

Alison Evans agreed that 'own voices is a way of re-balancing the industry.' Jessica Walton strongly concurred about the importance of Duyvis' work and highlighted her editorship of the **[Disability and KidLit website](#)** where

'disabled people review middle grade and YA books written for kids with disabled representation. The person doing the review shares the disability of the character in the book and it's an incredible resource'.

As a author who is both queer and disabled, Walton is particularly well-positioned to discuss the importance of intersectionality in YA collections. The concept of intersectionality, **[first named](#)** by African American feminist scholar and civil rights advocate Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, explores the ways in which people may be subject to marginalisation or discrimination on multiple fronts, and proposes that these forms of marginalisation overlap and intersect with each other. Walton illustrated this idea through her own experience, saying that

'as a disabled queer person, I often reflect on how I don't necessarily feel at home in either queer spaces or disability spaces if they're not inclusive of the full range of people within those communities. You might go to a queer event and realise that it's not fully

accessible. Or maybe I can get in there as an ambulant disabled person but there are other queer disabled people who are wheelchair users, who are non-ambulant, who would not be able to get into that space. Or if I'm in a disability space there might be someone talking about gender and sexuality and not mentioning LGBTI people at all as part of that discussion. So I think looking at the specific experiences of people who belong to multiple marginalised communities is really important and it helps us to identify problems. Having diverse characters is a really practical way of helping kids understand the world around them and the problems that are around them and to be able to maybe work towards solving those problems'.

The **We Need Diverse Books** movement which began in 2014 has been a huge force in promoting YA literature featuring diverse characters and characters with intersecting marginalised identities whether pertaining to culture, gender, sexuality, disability, First Nations identity, socio-economic status, neurodiversity or a plethora of other experiences. As the movement started in the United States where the publishing industry is much larger and the ethno-cultural demographics very different relative to Australia, the translation to the Australian context has at times not been a straightforward one and it may seem that in some areas our YA publishing is still catching up. In particular, many teacher librarians who seek to improve the visibility and representation of people of colour in their fiction collections may find a wealth of American content and only a small number of works that speak to the Australian experience, and this also holds true to an extent for LGBTQIA+ representation. Alison Evans reflected on why they think Australian content is particularly important in our library contexts:

**... teacher librarians have the power to move some of our most vulnerable young people away from this psychic disequilibrium ...**

'American books about high school feel not real: Australian high school is so different, it's like fantasy land. American content feels very alien to Australian teens: it wasn't my experience and I couldn't relate to that stuff.'

They reflected that this disconnect with YA realism was instrumental in developing their love of genre fiction: 'I like genre fiction because it's not pretending to be our world. It's not contemporary so it's allowed to be different and you kind of approach it in a different way.' Jordi Kerr added,

'And in terms of the difference between Australian and international [YA literature], the gender affirmation pathways in the US, and the legalities around it, are very different to the ones here. So if people are accessing information around that in literature from overseas, it's not going to be accurate information for their own experiences and whatever hoops they might have to jump through.'

I invited the authors to reflect on the impact of LGBTQIA+ representation and intersectionality in library collections, and Jessica Walton spoke about her experience of seeking to create a diverse book collection for her own children.

'I think about my own kids: they've got a disabled mum, they've got two mums, they've got a donor, they've got a transgender grandmother, and yet... there are so many people

who are not in the picture books that most kids are reading. And I know from personal experience that when you don't see yourself in books, it's damaging. It does you damage over the years. It sets up the way you think about the world and the way you realise that other people think about you. It's not just about what people are saying in those picture books: it's about what they're not saying and who they're not including. You start to understand that you're not in those books, that certain people are not in those books. It's a message that we're sending kids over and over again. With my own kids I tried to build a diverse library of picture books and that was really difficult because there's not that much out there. But as I was reading each of the picture books that I found, it was a healing thing, and that was the same as reading the first queer book in my twenties. First acknowledging the grief of not having had that myself, and then going "oh this is really healing": to read picture books and then middle grade and then YA and to kind of fill in those gaps and see everyone in those books and to go YES, we belong in there and screw anyone who thinks we don't.

Jordi Kerr added:

'I just wanted to add how self-affirming that representation is, and how literally life-saving it can be when someone in a position of power says "this story is worth telling". The impact that has can't be measured. One of my favourite quotes is from Adrienne Rich who said "When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing.'

**'What we're doing is trying to make a softer world.'**

By purposefully seeking out diverse and inclusive collections, according to the panel, teacher librarians have the power to move some of our most vulnerable young people away from this psychic disequilibrium and towards the healing experience of seeing their identities affirmed in the mirror of fiction. Alison Evans summarised: 'What we're doing is trying to make a softer world.'

While the panel agreed that LGBTQIA+ representation and visibility in contemporary Australian YA has certainly been on a positive trajectory, there was consensus that there is still plenty of room for improvement. Jordi Kerr commented:

'I want to see more trans characters, especially non-binary characters. *Ida* [Alison Evans' novel], which was published in 2017, is the first YA book published by a mainstream Australian publisher that features a non-binary character. And yet the latest research on young trans people in Australia shows that 48%, so nearly half, of young trans people identify as non-binary. So where the heck are they seeing themselves?'

Jessica Walton spoke about the need for the publishing industry to re-examine attitudes around creating windows into intersectionality in YA writing:

'There's been this assumption in publishing for a long time that people don't want to read something outside of their own experiences, and so when you have a character who's disabled and queer and has chronic pain someone might go "oh that's ridiculous,

that's a checklist, that's too weird, no-one's going to want to read that". But I think that young people are proving again and again that they do want to read about people who are different from them: we've always wanted to read about people who are other than ourselves but there's been an assumption that there's no appetite for it. And it's a self-perpetuating thing because if you never publish those books then no-one's reading them and you don't get a sense of whether people like those books and whether they'll sell. I'm really keen to see lots of people with multiple identities in books.'

Alison Evans reinforced the importance of diversifying publishing across a range of axes:

'And just trying to pave the way for other people as well. There are a lot of white people in the room: how are we making room for people of colour? When we talk about "what do boys read? What do girls read?", what about non-binary people? There are at least two non-binary people in this room and we read a lot because we're huge nerds.'

We wrapped up our discussion with a quick round of book recommendations from the panelists. Alison Evans, whose excellent novels *Ida* and *Highway Bodies* were unanimously recommended by the rest of the panel,

**... 'in addition to texts being stories to be enjoyed, they are powerful tools of social justice'.**

recommended Walker Books' forthcoming *Kindred anthology* (due for release in early June) which they described as 'very diverse and very cool'. They also suggested Steph Bowe's book *Night Swimming* (Text, 2017): 'It's a really cute romance set in a country town: there's a goat in it, it's great!'. Jordi Kerr recommended the work of Australian author Marlee Jane Ward whose dystopian novella *Welcome to Orphancorp* and its sequel *Psynode* have recently been joined by a third instalment, *Prisoncorp* (Seizure, 2019). They also love the work of young author Alice Oseman, whose books *Solitaire* (HarperCollins, 2014), *Radio Silence* (HarperCollins, 2016), and *I Was Born for This* (HarperCollins, 2018) are great examples of diverse representation. They loved Emily Gale's recent novel *I Am Out with Lanterns* (Penguin, 2018), of which they commented: 'The healing and the representation in this book was so powerful and I cried so much'. Other favourites included CB Lee's *Not Your Villain* (Duet, 2017), Pat Schmatz's *Lizard Radio* (Candlewick, 2015), Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* (Balzer+Bray, 2016), and the work of Adam Silvera, particularly his recent collaboration with Becky Albertalli, *What if it's Us* (HarperTeen, 2018). Jessica Walton, who is a big reader of graphic novels, recommended Cece Bell's graphic memoir *El Deafo* (Abrams, 2014), *Deadendia* by Hamish Steele (NoBrow Press, 2018), and Chad Sell's *The Cardboard Kingdom* (Penguin, 2018). She was also enthusiastic about the possibilities of anthologies for young readers:

'I think anthologies are a really great way to get a whole lot of different authors into the hands of teens, so *Meet Me at the Intersection* and *Kindred* and even the LoveOzYA collection *Begin, End, Begin* (HarperCollins, 2017) which has some good queer representation: I recommend getting those books to kids because that way they can not only see lots of different kinds of representation but also try out different authors and different genres and find something that speaks to them.'

I felt very lucky to have the opportunity for dialogue with these three writers who are not only forging their own paths in the Australian literary landscape with their writing, but who have such

a profound depth of understanding of the importance of visibility and representation in young people's literature. Their passion and authenticity left me with a renewed understanding of how teacher librarians have the power to facilitate transformative literary experiences for the young people in our care through providing access to diverse and inclusive collections, and were a powerful reminder of the words of literacy educator **Chad Everett** who writes of diverse books that 'in addition to texts being stories to be enjoyed, they are powerful tools of social justice'.

## References

Sims Bishop, R. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 1(3), 9-11.

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