

UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

Are We There Yet?

Queer Representation in Three Young Adult
Novels Between 1952 and 1994

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Abstract

The queer young adult genre is one that has only recently been established. Before 1969 queer teenagers had to look for representation in adult novels rather than in the genre specifically meant for their demographic. Three novels, *Spring Fire*, *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, and *Deliver Us From Evie*, are analysed in order to determine whether they reject or conform to societal ideas about homosexuality in the United States. Queer theory is used to see how these novels manage to have positive queer representation despite the overt homophobia that is present in the novels as well as the society in which the authors wrote their works. The didactic importance of having positive representation for young people is also addressed. All novels conform to the societal expectations of the times in which they were written: homophobic attitudes can therefore be seen in all novels, as well as a growing acceptance of homosexuality after the 1960s.

Introduction

Exactly two years ago, on June 26 2015, the United States Supreme Court made history by legalising same-sex marriage across the country. This development is evidence that acceptance of queer people has made considerable progress in the past fifty years. Before the turn of the 21st century, gay people were often persecuted or invalidated because of their sexual identities. This was also reflected in literature, where representation of queer people was more often than not negative, and happy endings were even more rare. Stories such as *Brokeback Mountain* were applauded by the mainstream media for their tragic love stories, yet most stories with two people of the same sex in a relationship had a bad ending. This was the only reality for queer people who wanted to read novels with characters they could relate to: “The majority of the early texts in this field largely depicted homosexuality as a passing phase; as incurring retribution through ostracism, violence, and even death; and as a ‘lifestyle’ that dooms characters to dreary, isolated lives” (Wickens 149). As author Patricia Highsmith recalls first-hand: “Homosexuals male and female in American novels had had to pay for their deviation by cutting their wrists, drowning themselves in a swimming pool, or by switching to heterosexuality (so it was stated), or by collapsing – alone and miserable and shunned – into a depression equal to hell” (Highsmith §15). Highsmith was a prolific author whose work *The Price of Salt* has recently been adapted to the movie *Carol*. This novel was published in 1952 and featured a happy ending for both its queer characters. This shows that the adult queer genre made some steps long before the queer young adult genre came into existence, but novels with happy endings like *The Price of Salt* were few and far between.

What contributed to this meagre positive representation is that among the general population, homosexuality was seen as sinful and morally deviant. Up until 1973, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder, which was not considered controversial at that time because it corresponded with dominant societal attitudes towards homosexuality.

This had a negative effect on gay people, because the classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder encouraged “antihomosexual societal prejudices, leaving gay men and women vulnerable in terms of their physical safety, economic security, and overall well being” (LGBT Mental Health Syllabus). Not until the 1990s has queer literature been seeing a change to a more progressive representation, where the main problem was not homosexuality, but homophobia (Wickens 149). The adult queer genre has existed long before 1969, but only recently have young queer teenagers had the opportunity to read novels with characters they could relate to, and with positive representation and endings.

To illustrate this change of societal attitudes towards queer people, three novels have been selected for analysis. The first novel is *Spring Fire*, by Vin Packer. Written in 1952, this novel reflects a society in which queerness is not even a topic discussed in the public sphere. The second novel is *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan, whose publication coincided with the beginnings of the gay rights movement. The third novel is *Deliver Us From Evie* by M.E. Kerr, the same author as *Spring Fire*'s, but under a different pseudonym. This author has seen two ends of the spectrum of representation, because her first novel barely passed inspection because of its homosexual content, and her second novel shows a strong and proud gay girl, written in 1994. The theoretical background gives more information on how these three novels are analysed from the perspective of gender studies.

This thesis is structured around the following questions: Do the novels by Packer, Kerr, and Donovan all conform to the socio-political framework in which they were written? How does the representation of the queer themes and characters in these novels change between the 1950s and now, and how does queer young adult literature differ in representing queer characters and themes between the 1950 and now? What is the didactic impact of this representation for young people? These three questions are revisited in the conclusion in order to concisely summarise the findings of this paper.

Theoretical Background

In order to get a consistent and informed reading of all the novels, they are all analysed from the perspective of queer theory. This perspective takes into account that a text is read differently by people with various motivations and backgrounds. For example, as will be seen with *Spring Fire*, the negative queer representation did not deter a large lesbian reader demographic to make itself known to the publishing world. While the novel conformed to heteronormative societal ideas about queerness, *Spring Fire* sparked the interest of queer readers, even though there is barely a positive word about queer people to be found within its pages. It seems that, in the 1950s, queer readers were not used to being represented in novels at all. For them, any representation would be acceptable, as long as they would find characters like them in the novels. Thus, a queer reading of the novel gives a different, more positive context of recognition for its readership than the homophobia that is contained in the novel itself.

Not only does the queer perspective look at different readings and interpretations, but it also looks at how a text disrupts and challenges traditional hegemonic binaries (e.g., male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, white/black). This perspective is used to challenge historical and social norms and aims to give voice to “othered” minorities (Nylund 19). The notion of Othered minorities Nylund mentions is explained by Stuart Hall. Othering is an act of defining a dominant identifier (the Self) by means of contrasting it with an opposite identifier, for example a black person is identified by not being white, or a gay person is not straight. Often this dichotomous thinking works with power structures as well, where a minority group is Othered because it stands opposite of the dominant group. Othering is not a dialogue, however: the Other is defined by the Self, the dominant structure. The Other barely gets the chance to define itself, and we see this Othering often at play with stereotyping, where the identity of the gay person, for example, is defined by the heterosexual person in

order to generalise and tokenise the gay identity without any input of the gay person in question. The subject of Othering is explored in the three novels alongside the queer theory approach, in order to see how the Othered minorities in question are represented and how this ties in with dominant heteronormative societal ideas.

Next to queer theory, the didactic impact and importance of young adult novels is also discussed. The young adult genre is one that reflects societal developments (Waters §6), and at the end of the 1960s the genre came to reflect the changing social climate and growing acceptance of queer people. Kenneth Kidd argues that in the 1980s and 1990s the queer young adult genre has made considerable steps in improving its representation of queer characters. According to him, the greatest shift in queer young adult literature is that, instead of homosexuality being portrayed as a social problem, it is now homophobia that has come to be portrayed as the problem in society (114). Karen Coats thinks this shift is a good development because young adult novels are an important factor in shaping an adolescent's identity: "Young adult literature exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation" (315). This is why it is exceptionally important to have young adult novels portray queer themes and characters in a positive way – for example without condemning them or indicating that their sexuality is immoral or temporal – lest young adults develop a negative sense of self and internalised homophobia because of negative representation. Thus, the topic of positive representation is also looked at when analysing the novels.

Chapter One

Spring Fire by Vin Packer

Published in 1952, *Spring Fire* is a novel about two roommates in a sorority house: Mitch and Leda. They start an affair that ultimately ends unhappily. Unsurprising, when taking into account the social climate in which the novel was written. It was published in a time where homosexuality was still classified as a mental disorder. Before the early twentieth century, homosexuality was seen as a choice rather than an inherent part of a person's identity. As a result, queer people were condemned on moral and religious grounds because they were thought to have made the conscious choice to commit sin. By classifying homosexuality as a mental disorder, the responsibility for defining and curing homosexual behaviour shifted from the religious realm to the scientific. This shift caused people to think that homosexuality could be cured with the right mental treatment, and as such gay people could be sent to asylums (LGBT Mental Health Syllabus). Homosexuality was only declassified as a mental disorder in 1973, so Packer wrote *Spring Fire* in a time where there were still serious social ramifications for people who were outed as gay. According to Packer, the novel would not be published if she did not conform to outside pressure: ““You see, our books go through the mails. They have to pass inspection. If one book is considered censurable, the whole shipment is sent back to the publisher. If your book appears to proselytize for homosexuality, all the books sent with it are returned”” (vi). The novel had to have the main character reject homosexuality. It was not enough to have her deny her own feelings; she had to explicitly distance herself from her sexuality. This is why the novel ends with Mitch looking back on her relationship with Leda as something that meant nothing to her: ““Because it was true what she had told Leda yesterday. She didn't hate her. She didn't hate her at all, and she knew then that she had never really loved her”” (Packer 160). In one sentence, the relationship Leda and Mitch build throughout the novel, is invalidated by Packer. In this way, Mitch's attraction to

Leda could be seen by inspectors as a mistake she wants to make right again by being exclusively heterosexual.

Mitch and Leda start an illicit and confusing relationship that ends unhappily for both of them. While both girls seem to want their relationship to work out, they know that what they are doing is not normal: “Jan’s face had come to her like a ghost, tormenting her with shame, symbolizing the impossibility of Mitch and Leda and a love that was wrong. It was not even love. It could not possibly be love” (Packer 66). Packer depicts homosexuality as something sinful and inherently wrong; this depiction is the reason why Mitch has trouble coming to terms with her queerness. Nobody questions why it is wrong, and it seems that this aversion to homosexuality – or indeed this homophobia is ingrained in society. For Mitch, this is very confusing, because she is looking for a reason to condemn her homosexuality or to accept it; she only finds people telling her it is wrong without elaborating on what exactly is wrong about it. She recalls a moment in her childhood where she is taught that homosexuality is sinful, but in a way that not explicitly explains why it is immoral and why it is condemned by society:

There was something wrong and ill in the two of them like that, Mitch knew, but what? When she was a child near the dam where she had gone with her father, on the worn lead pipe there were bad words written and she had said, “What do they mean?” They were bad words, he explained, and there was that about his explanation that made her feel guilty, as though she had taken the white chalk and put the words there. (Packer 61-62)

In *Spring Fire*, queer people are actively Othered from heterosexuality. This can be seen especially in Mitch’s confusion about her sexuality. She has lived a sheltered life and has

never come into contact with the term “lesbian,” and as such she sets out to find the definition of lesbian in dictionaries and library books. She finds the following: “The female homosexual, the Lesbian, often preys on girls who are not true homosexuals. Such girls may enjoy men, and be capable of normal heterosexual life if they do not become involved with a genuine Lesbian type, whose technique is often more skillful than that of many of her young men suitors” (Packer 103). The text almost resembles that of a guide describing the behaviour of a predatory animal, instead of a person with a different sexuality. The use of the word “normal” makes sure that the reader views heterosexuality as the norm, and homosexuality as the outlier, with negative connotations attached to the term. According to Hall, this is an act of stereotyping: “[Stereotyping] divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable ... it sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant,’ the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’, what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’” (248). The library book Mitch uses to get more information on her sexuality, reduces lesbians to the stereotype of sexual deviants who take advantage of naïve girls.

Throughout the novel, the characters have trouble putting to words the kind of attraction Mitch and Leda feel for each other. They talk around the labels as if it were something abhorrent. When Mitch tries to give a label to the feelings she has for Leda, she finds the following definition in the dictionary: “Les’bi·an (ləz’bī·ən) *adj.* 1. Of or pertaining to Lesbos (now Mytilene), one of the Aegean Islands. 2. Erotic;—in allusion to the reputed sensuality of the people of Lesbos” (Packer 81). The dictionary entry is very noncommittal in its description, using ambiguous words such as “allusion” and “reputed,” and it does not actually give the kind of definition Mitch hoped for, namely one that could have helped her figure out her feelings. Another instance is when Leda is hospitalized after a car crash, and in a fit of delirium, she confesses to her friends that she loved Mitch. This event is how the rest

of her sorority house discovers Leda's and Mitch's brief relationship. A doctor in the hospital explains the following to Leda's sorority sisters: "She's very ill – in her mind as well as in her body." "Lord!" Kitten exclaimed. "You'd never think she was one. All those dates and everything'" (Packer 142). The only instances where the word lesbian is used, are when Leda and Mitch refer to themselves as such, and not in a positive manner. Leda tells Mitch the following after Mitch declares her love: "Sure, I've got bisexual tendencies, but by God, I'm no damn lesbian ... There are a lot of people who love both and no one gives a damn, and they just say they're oversexed and they don't care. But they start getting interested when you stick to one sex. Like you've been doing, Mitch. I couldn't love you if you were a lesbian" (80). As stated above, Mitch then goes to the library to find out what a lesbian is, as she is clearly unfamiliar with the word – a sign that it is a topic kept under wraps by most people in her life. She eventually writes a letter of confession to Leda, wherein she says the following: "*Lesbian* is an ugly word and I hate it. But that's what I am, Leda, and my feelings toward you are homosexual" (106). It is not strange to see why she would think of the word lesbian as ugly, as the only sources she has managed to get information from either are unclear, like the dictionary, or warn the reader about the predatory nature of lesbians, as mentioned in the library book.

The novel, as discussed before, conforms to prevailing heteronormative ideas about queerness. Lesbians are demonized by portraying them as mentally disturbed and sexually predatory women. A queer reading for this queer novel, however, aims to look beyond the negative stereotyping and condemnation of homosexuality. While it does not have a happy ending, *Spring Fire* was still a bestselling novel that garnered a large lesbian fan following. Packer looks back on the time when the novel was published and thinks that the popularity of the novel was partly due to a lack of other materials queer people could relate to, and so they made do with the small scraps of acknowledgement they were given: "Lesbians and

homosexuals, in those days, had no sense of entitlement. The majority of us were closeted ... Lesbian readers were able to look past the cover: to find themselves between the pages. We always found ourselves” (vii, ix). This also shows that, before there were any movements for better queer rights, the majority of queer people had to look for hints of homosexuality in novels and other media, or they had to make do with stories in which queer characters would ultimately have an unhappy ending: “They had, to begin with, no positive way to see themselves, no precedent on which to stand” (Clendinen and Nagourney 13). People rather had media with negative representation than no representation at all, because at least in negative representation they were acknowledged. People living isolated and closeted lives would see in these books and movies that other queer people like them do exist, even though the heteronormative society does not accept them. While *Spring Fire* was written by a lesbian, she had to change the story to fit in with prevalent heteronormative ideas. Yet, despite a lack of representation, the novel was still read by a large number of queer people, challenging the very heterosexist hegemony that tried to silence them.

Chapter Two

I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip by John Donovan

Published in the same year as the Stonewall Riots took place, *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* can be seen as symbolical for a historical turning point in queer history and queer young adult literature. In the 1950s, Republican senator Joseph McCarthy claimed that Communist spies were working in U.S. State departments. This resulted in the Red Scare – a time of widespread suspicion, where a great number of government employees were questioned, surveyed, and fired because they might be spying for the Soviet Union. A lesser known but deeply connected issue during this time is the Lavender Scare, born out of the same fear for Communists. The witch hunt for these “commies and queers” resulted in a pervasive mistrust and intolerance for gay people within the U.S government. The republican party jumped on McCarthy’s allegations and reasoned that the Communists had help from the inside, namely from homosexual government employees (Johnson 20). Homosexuals were believed to be morally weak and thus more susceptible to the charms of communist spies, and therefore they proved an equal—and in the eyes of some an even greater—threat to government secrecy. While the Red Scare petered out relatively quickly, the Lavender Scare continued to pervade U.S legislation until the 1990s, when president Clinton revoked the law that prohibited gay people from having a government function that was put into action during the early 1950s. However, tensions within the queer community rose due to these forms of discrimination which, paired with the civil rights movements, led to the Stonewall Riots just two months after the publication of John Donovan’s novel. Clendinen and Nagourney paint the 1960s as a decade of social change: “A decade that had upended the social order, drawing whole classes of the American culture into collision with each other” (11). Yet, the gay rights movement remained in the background, because the vast majority of queer people thought it was their burden to bear in secret. Gay bars were raided by the police regularly, and there was

no protest from the gay community, only meek acceptance. The Stonewall Riots were different, as that was the moment where queer people violently protested against the police raids. As such, the Stonewall Riots are seen as the beginning of the gay rights movements because it was the event that let the general public know that queer people existed among them and wanted to be publicly acknowledged as such (Clendinen and Nagourney 11; Jenkins 299). This is the socio-historical background against which *I'll Get There. It Better be Worth the Trip* was created. Not a lot had changed since *Spring Fire*, as homosexuality was still a taboo in a lot of households and public spheres. Yet, with the growing frustration and protests for better rights for both black and queer people, Donovan and his editor saw the chance to publish his novel.

While being the first young adult novel to outwardly discuss the topic of homosexuality, *I'll Get There* still very much conforms to homophobic rhetoric of the 1960s. The protagonist, a thirteen year old boy named Davy, develops a tentative relationship with a boy in his class named Douglas Altschuler. Roberta Seelinger Trites and Christine Jenkins both say that, while *I'll Get There* is progressive because of being the first young adult novel where homosexuality is openly addressed, it still fails to be a positive novel for young queer readers, as it reinforces homophobic ideas from the 1960s. According to Trites, the way Davy's sexuality is described in the novel seems to conform to this homophobic rhetoric almost seamlessly: "Even when Davy is describing in first-person narration the events that he has initiated with ... Altschuler, he seems removed from them, as if the situation is so ineffable that he cannot define it for himself. He clearly feels a pleasure that he is uncomfortable identifying because the rhetoric frightens him even more than the physical sensations do" (144-45). Jenkins expands on Trites's idea by stating that "the same-sex encounter of Donovan's young men in 1969 is presented as a temporary aberration, even as a predictable stage in their development as heterosexual adults" (316). Indeed, Davy is very

confused by the idea of homosexuality, and he sees it as something negative. After their first kiss, Davy and Altschuler are awkward around each other, not daring to look each other in the eyes until Altschuler tries to lift the mood by wrestling with Davy: “We mess around for a few seconds, pretending we are two bantamweight tough guys. I mean very tough. I mean a couple of guys like Altschuler and me don’t have to worry about being queer or anything like that. Hell, no” (Donovan 150). To Davy, the word “queer” has a pejorative connotation, one he does not want to associate himself with. This ties in with Hall’s theory of separating the dominant social group from the Othered minority group, as Davy recognises homosexuality as something that is not normal in his society, and thus he tries to avoid labelling himself in such a way that makes him stand apart from the dominant heteronormative norm. Yet, Davy’s struggle between confusion and pleasure does not deter him from further exploring his relationship with Altschuler, and it is implied that a few days later, they have a sexual encounter of some sort: “I have a new way of looking at Altschuler because of what we did together last night. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not ashamed. There was nothing wrong about it, I keep telling myself” (158). Despite not being ashamed, Davy still feels conflicted. He constantly tells himself that what he is doing is not wrong. This doubt can be seen as a result of a very pervasive social attitude towards queer people, so pervasive even that Davy has trouble looking past his internalised homophobia: “There’s nothing wrong with Altschuler and me, is there? I know it’s not like making out with a girl. It’s just something that happened. It’s not dirty, or anything like that. It’s all right, isn’t it?” (161). He seems to have the right idea that there is nothing wrong with him being queer, yet he still has to reassure himself multiple times of this.

Then, Davy’s mother discovers him and Altschuler sleeping on the floor of her living room. While nothing happened between the two that day, Davy’s mother rapidly jumps to conclusions and has a very emotional reaction. It becomes clear that Davy’s mother thinks

much less positively about homosexuality than Davy himself does. Whereas Davy keeps reassuring himself that what he does with Altschuler is not wrong or sinful, his mother thinks very differently: “‘Nothing ... unnatural ... happened this afternoon with you and Douglas, did it?’ ‘No,’ I say. ‘Or ever?’ ‘What do you mean unnatural?’ ‘I want the truth, Davy.’ I back away from mother” (169). While he is already emotionally distant to her due to not growing up under her care for his entire childhood, Davy now also physically distances himself from her. Her usage of the word “unnatural” and her forcing him to answer her questions reaffirms Davy’s doubts about himself and his actions. His mother then calls his father, whom she divorced but still keeps in contact with for Davy’s sake. He sits Davy down for a conversation – one that at first glance seems to go well. “‘I’m not prying, Davy,’ my father says, ‘so don’t get mad. We don’t talk about personal things much, but sometimes it can’t be avoided. I guess you have a crush on your friend, is that it?’” (173). His father is very calm and not as judgmental as his mother, which puts Davy at ease enough that he admits to kissing Altschuler. While his father is much more open-minded, he still tells Davy that he “shouldn’t get involved in some special way of life which will close off other ways of life to me” (173). This confirms Trites’ and Jenkins’ thoughts about the novel portraying homosexuality as a phase, and this conversation with his father might be the reason why, at the end of the novel, he decides to exclusively enter relationships with girls from then on. On top of that, his beloved dog Fred dies, and Davy, in his grief, assumes that his relationship with Altschuler is the cause. Due to his internalised homophobia, Davy feels as if he is being punished for his homosexual behaviour, and this results in a conflict with Altschuler, who does not feel the same guilt and uncertainty.

Despite the homophobic rhetoric that can be seen throughout the novel, *I’ll Get There* still carries a more positive message to its readership than *Spring Fire* did seventeen years prior. The ending of the novel plays a large role in this, because it is not as definitive as

Spring Fire was in showing its readers that a same-sex relationship would not work out.

Whereas Packer's novel ends in one character being treated in a mental hospital and the other denying her homosexual feelings, Donovan's novel ends on a much more ambiguous note, as Brent Hartinger says in the afterword: "Wherever the 'there' of the title is, Davy hasn't arrived yet. How could he? It wasn't possible in the world of 1969, not for a thirteen-year-old boy" (209). Davy and Altschuler talk about what happened between them, and they agree on staying friends and respecting each other. While Davy still has some lingering feelings of guilt about his dog's death, Altschuler keeps insisting that he does not regret anything: "It didn't feel wrong. Did it to you? ... what happened to Fred had nothing to do with what we did ... go ahead and feel guilty if you want to. I don't" (Donovan 197). Altschuler's refusal to feel regret or guilt about their short-lived relationship goes against the homophobic narrative that is inherent in Davy's perspective. His voice is the only one in the novel telling the readers that they don't have to feel guilty for being queer – something that Davy has trouble coming to terms with. Despite the two characters ending their relationship, and Davy promising himself that he would only date girls in the future, the addition of Altschuler's unapologetic insistence on not changing himself or feeling regret is what makes this novel more positive than *Spring Fire*.

According to Thomas W. Bean and Karen Moni, what makes young adult novels so interesting for young readers is that they "deal with issues that are relevant to teens, including racism, pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, family conflicts, and political injustice, young adult novels provide a roadmap of sorts for adolescents coping with these issues in real life" (638). Teenagers no longer had to skip from children's novels to adult novels, but could find the issues they struggled with more accurately represented in young adult novels. The didactic importance of young adult novels is all about representation and relatability: "[Young adult novels] were relevant to the lives of actual teenagers, speaking to them not in a preachy,

instructional way, but in a personal, intimate one” (Hartinger 204). Queer teenagers reading about people like them in novels gives them the idea that they are not the only one. Because of the overwhelming heteronormativity in society, it can be isolating to be different from the norm. Young people reading young adult novels would see characters and themes acknowledged that they would not normally see in other genres (Logan 31). This is especially important for young people with marginalized identities that make them into an Other, because it shows them that they are not the only one who does not belong with the dominant majority, or the Self. In 1969, homosexuality would not have been a topic easily discussed, and thus a young queer person might feel that they are the only one who is not heterosexual, simply because their sexual orientation is not discussed in any form of media. “I like to think it would have given me some comfort, knowing I wasn’t, in fact, alone in the world. There were other boys like me out there. And seeing yourself reflected in the culture as a visible, strong hero of a story is as important today as it was in 1969” (220) says Martin Wilson, who discovered the novel when he was already an adult. Whether Davy is a “strong hero” as Wilson suggests, is questionable. He ultimately decides that his queerness was a phase, but while he was still in a relationship with Altschuler, he does his best to tell himself that he is not committing any sinful or morally wrong acts. While *I’ll Get There* still conforms to homophobic 1960s ideas, it ultimately ends on a non-tragic note, which is a large step when compared to the queer novels that came before. Because this novel was written with a young adult readership in mind, it has a better ability to impact young readers than an adult novel. As Wilson says, if Donovan’s novel has helped only a few young queer readers with finding acceptance within themselves, it would have still been worth it, because those few teenagers have discovered that there is a greater community for them out there.

Chapter Three

Deliver Us From Evie by M.E. Kerr

Since the publication of Donovan's novel in 1969, the social climate surrounding queer rights has become better. According to Michelle Ann Abate, the AIDS crisis in the 1980s made the fight for queer rights an urgent one, because AIDS decimated the numbers of queer people in the United States: "[M]any realized – as one popular slogan of the era put it – that their silence would equal their death" (228-29). Because activists were no longer silent and easily deterred, a lot of state wide policies were amended in favour of queer partnerships and non-discrimination. As a result, gay and lesbian studies became a new academic field, and homosexuality became widely visible. *Deliver Us From Evie* is an interesting antithesis to *I'll Get There*, because it shows a wildly different way of dealing with homophobia, both internalised in the main character's psyche, and inherent in contemporary society. While *I'll Get There's* protagonist Davy is very uncertain in his sexual orientation – and his entire journey to self-acceptance in the novel ultimately seems to imply he leaves his homosexuality behind him – protagonist Evie is much the opposite of that: she fights for her own right to exist and to love, even if it means leaving her much beloved, but repressive, childhood home in favour of a more open-minded city. The positive changes the queer rights movement has brought about in the 1990s on a legislative scale, that did not mean homophobia was eradicated from society, especially not in rural Midwestern communities, as *Deliver Us From Evie* shows.

While being published 25 years after *I'll Get There*, Kerr's novel still features a lot of homophobia directed towards the protagonist. Unlike Davy, however, Evie does not seem to have any internalised homophobia, as she actively rebukes others' attempts at changing her, and at the end of the novel she moves to New York in order to live in a more open-minded environment. While she is living in Duffton, a small rural town in Missouri, she faces a lot of

people who do not condone her relationship with Patsy Duff, the local banker's daughter. On the very first page, Evie's brother Parr gets mocked by his classmates because of his sister: "“Hey, we know your brother. What's his name again?” ‘Doug Burrman,’ I said. They said, ‘Not *that* brother! Your other brother.’ ‘I only have one brother,’ I said. They said, ‘What about Evie?’ Then they began to laugh” (Kerr 1-2). These comments are not limited to school kids, as Parr's and Evie's father also makes the same kind of comments about his cousin: “Cousin Joe. Dad called him Cousin Josephine because he'd lived on a farm with another old man for thirty years. They were a couple, Dad said – ‘a couple of fruits’” (37). A lot of the criticism directed towards Evie seems to be related to her masculine way of presenting herself. Just like Parr's classmates, Patsy's father questions Evie's intentions towards Patsy by referring to her masculine side: “What's that girl of yours up to, if she even is a girl?” (51). This same sort of conversation also takes place later in the novel, when Parr gets a warning from his girlfriend's father, who also asks after his intentions with his daughter (141). It also seems that being called “queer” is one of the most embarrassing things to happen to a person, as Evie's father is afraid that Evie will be seen as a lesbian after she attended a concert of a lesbian singer: “You don't care if someone gets the idea you're a dyke because you go to a concert like that?” (Kerr 57). He is very concerned that Evie's reputation will be slandered, while she tries to tell him that she does not care if people call her a dyke. When eventually news gets out about Evie's and Patsy's relationship, some townspeople are in denial, like Parr's girlfriend Angel: ““Poor Evie,’ said Angel. ‘If anybody'd said that about me, I'd like to die!’” (Kerr 138). She thinks someone was playing a practical joke on Evie by calling her a lesbian, and her first reaction is to be mortified and concerned, like Evie's father. While Evie is largely unapologetic about her identity, the people in her community are very unfavourable about her relationship with Patsy.

Of course, the troubling aspect of this novel is not just the homophobia Evie faces in her small rural community, but the perspective from which the story is told. Her younger brother Parr is the one who tells Evie's story, and not Evie herself. The reader is not privy to her thoughts on the hatred the townspeople feel towards her, and whether or not Parr decides to divulge any information is left entirely up to him. It thus is unclear if Evie indeed does not feel any internalised homophobia, or if Parr only sees the fearless part of her. He is an unreliable narrator, which makes it difficult for the reader to imagine how Evie feels about a critical turning point in her life. While Parr's account of Evie is largely favourable, the fact that he is the one to tell Evie's story is very reminiscent of the silencing queer people in society have endured: they are not given a voice, and are actively Othered from the discussion by the dominant heterosexual majority. This Othering is very present throughout the novel, because queer people are described as different, and not normal. In Evie's case, people judge her difference on the outside, because she dresses in a way they feel is not normal: "Someone like Evie gets all the blame. She's the funny one, the fluke ... and Patsy Duff is just a rebel with a wild streak" (Kerr 131). This is in reference to the way the two girls dress and behave, as Patsy is a flirty girl who dresses immaculately, with designer dresses and never a hair out of place. Parr makes the distinction between Patsy, Evie's mom, and Evie as follows: "You'd say Evie was handsome. You'd say Mom was pretty" (Kerr 3). So even within lesbianism, there seems to be a hierarchy of acceptability, because people assume that Evie is the predatory girl who turned Patsy into a lesbian: "'I'd be afraid, Parr.' 'Of *Evie*?' 'Well, not of Evie ... of what she was, if she was one ... she's supposed to be after Mr. Duff's daughter'" (Kerr 110). Patsy, on the other hand, seems to be viewed by everyone as being perfectly able to go from a homosexual to a heterosexual relationship, because she is not seen as stereotypically lesbian. She is still very feminine whereas Evie dresses in a very masculine manner; people would remark on her looks even without knowing she was a lesbian. Evie

herself is the only resistant voice to all the Othering, directly calling out her mother on her behaviour: “I know you so-called normal people would like it better if we looked as much like all of you as possible, but some of us don’t, can’t, and never will” (86).

Evie, in the previous quote, tells her mother that she is unable to change for others. This topic of change comes up in the novel a lot. Parr, on multiple occasions, refers to Evie as unable, or unwilling, to change, such as in the following example: “I said, ‘You’ll change your mind,’ but it was only wishful thinking. The whole idea of Evie in the same sentence with change, once she was set on her course, was what you call an oxymoron. Opposite ideas combined” (Kerr 95). Parr is a positive voice in Evie’s story, because he believes that Evie is the way she is, and that her sexual orientation is not a phase. The other people in Evie’s life either feel that Evie’s attraction to women will pass, or actively try to change her. Evie’s mother is one of the latter, as she continually tries to get Evie to change the way she behaves and dresses herself: “She was trying hard to change Evie that fall, trying everything, but it was like trying to change the direction of the wind” (4). Evie is shown to actively resist her mother’s attempts, as she refuses to change for her: “[I]f you’d just let me help you with your clothes, if you’d just change your hair, *style* it – you could still wear it short. You could—” Evie cut her off. ‘I’m the way I am’” (24). Eventually, it becomes clear that the changing Evie has to do for her mother is an allegory for changing her sexuality as well – even her brother Parr remarks upon this in a conversation he overhears between Evie and Cord, a local boy who works at their farm; he has a crush on Evie that everyone in the family knows about, Evie included: “Evie came downstairs in her jeans and Mom’s sweater, sporting her new haircut, and Cord said, ‘Your hair’s changed.’ ‘Nothing else has, though,’ Evie said. I suppose that was her way of warning him not to get his hopes up” (30). Cord eventually finds out about Evie’s and Patsy’s relationship, and he treats the situation as if it were a big joke (90) or as if Evie will change her mind eventually: “That thing’s not gonna last, Parr. You think a girl

like Patsy Duff's going to want Evie once she's met herself a man? ... Evie's got her man ways, for sure, but a lot of women from the farm do ... she'd have snapped out of it if this thing hadn't gotten blown all out of proportion" (100).

While Evie's mother eventually accepts her daughter's sexuality, and changes her behavior accordingly, Cord's behaviour eventually goes beyond him thinking Evie will turn heterosexual by herself. He believes that it is up to him and Parr to set her straight: "We're not doing this *to* Evie, either – we're doing it *for* Evie. The only way she's going to snap out of this thing is for old man Duff to get that Dyke daughter of his out of Evie's way" (Kerr 104-105). He then convinces Parr to participate in outing Evie and Patsy to everyone in town, which results in outrage from many people who refuse to have Evie come near them. Cord is called out on his behaviour by Evie's father, who, despite having trouble coming to terms with his daughter's sexuality, still knows that Cord was being wrongfully hateful. This way of portraying Cord's actions and Evie's father's subsequent reaction, is evidence of Kidd's claim that homophobia has become the problematic factor in newer queer young adult novels, rather than homosexuality being the source of trouble.

What sets *Deliver Us From Evie* apart from the other two novels, is that Evie does not deny her queerness. She refuses to bend for the wishes of the homophobic people around her. She has the support of her family – even her mother, who in the end wants her daughter to be safe, and wishes her good luck with her life in New York – which is something that Davy from *I'll Get There* did not have: his mother had a strong negative reaction, and his father assured him that it was fine to be different, as long as he did not make it a permanent lifestyle. Davy eventually decides to leave behind his queerness, and the ending suggests that he will pursue heterosexual relationships from then on. In *Spring Fire*, the two girls have an even more negative ending, as one of them ends up in a mental hospital, and the other rejects her homosexual feelings. The difference between the two books by Meaker is a good illustration

on the changes queer literature has made within half a century: “The contrast between *Spring Fire* and *Deliver Us From Evie* is stark, and echoes a larger cultural shift that was quickly reflected in—and even propelled by—queer fiction. Once equated with obscenity, positive portrayals of same-gender love have become more and more mainstream” (Waters §3). Evie, while faced with homophobia, decides to leave in search of a more accepting community – one she knows is out there because of the growing visibility of queer people since the AIDS crisis. She does not decide to be heterosexual in order to comply with the wishes of the people around her, but instead goes to find people that do accept her. This shows the reader that being queer is not something morally wrong or to be condemned, despite the claims of homophobic people. Evie is a strong protagonist who stands fast in the face of hatred and ignorance, and her family does their best to support her. The positive message is not as hard to find in this novel than it was for readers of *Spring Fire* and *I’ll Get There*, and this shows a change in what was possible to write about in the 1950s and in the 1990s. *Deliver Us From Evie* carries a much more positive message towards the reader than *Spring Fire*, and the fact that this novel was printed without having to meet a certain standard, such as having to include an unhappy ending in order for the book to be accepted by the publisher, shows that societal acceptance of queer people has also come a long way.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, three questions were posed by which the three novels would be analysed. The first question was an inquiry into the socio-political state of the United States during the times in which the three stories take place: Do the novels by Packer, Kerr, and Donovan all conform to the socio-political framework in which they were written? Packer's novel *Spring Fire* was written in a time where homosexuality was not a topic that was discussed in public. As such, it was difficult for Packer to publish it, and she had to change the ending to a negative one in order for it to pass inspection. The novel, in this way, clearly reflects the marginalised position queer people held in society, and the fact that it did not have a happy ending could as well be interpreted as a message to queer people: they did not deserve a happy ending. Donovan wrote *I'll Get There* in a similar environment: not a lot had changed in terms of socio-political developments with regards to queer rights. Homosexuality was classified as a mental illness, and this showed in how some gay people were treated. What set *I'll Get There* apart from *Spring Fire*, is that it was written against the backdrop of social change that was happening in the 1960s, with the Civil Rights movements changing how society viewed marginalised groups, and a growing anger as a result of the Violet Scare, which saw many gay people fired from government functions. For that reason Donovan was able to get his novel through inspection in the publishing world. *I'll Get There* carries a more positive message than *Spring Fire*, and paved the road for writers of other queer young adult novels. Despite it having a more positive message, protagonist Davy is plagued by his internalised homophobia, which is a result of the society he lives in. On top of that, his mother is not accepting of his sexuality, and his father reminds him that he should think carefully about which lifestyle he pursues in his future. The novel ends ambiguously, and can be interpreted both by proponents and opponents of queer rights as a positive or negative representation. Davy decides his homosexuality was just a phase, and as such returns to

heterosexual life. This is something could be used as evidence by people who condemn homosexuality. *Deliver Us From Evie* reflects a society in which the AIDS epidemic has left a visible mark on the queer community, which made queer people more vocal in their demands for better rights. More rights were granted to them in politics, but in society this acceptance left much to be desired. In Kerr's novel, this is shown in the fact that the homophobia Evie faces is the problematic factor: Evie's homosexuality is not the problem, but the people who condemn her. By doing this, *Deliver Us From Evie* shows the normalisation of queer identity in society.

The second question overlaps with the first question on many points. The question was as follows: how does the representation of the queer themes and characters in these novels change between the 1950s and now? As shown in the previous paragraph, the novels largely align with the socio-political status of queer people in the United States, with varying degrees of acceptance. It would therefore be logical that they saw a more positive representation over time. Where *Spring Fire* saw nothing but negative representation, with *I'll Get There* and *Deliver Us From Evie*, the characters got better endings, as well as a visible rejection of homophobia in the latter novel. Thus, not only has queerness become better depicted and represented, eventually those people who oppose queer characters have become the ones to be condemned.

The third question dealt with the didactic impact a positive or negative representation in a novel might have on the reader. For *Spring Fire*, the negative message it carried would be nothing new. Negativity was almost everything a queer person in the 1950s might see, and as such it would not be surprising to have another instance added to the collection of largely negative representations. That is, if queer people were represented at all. As stated before, homosexuality was rarely discussed, and as a result any scrap of representation – positive or otherwise – would still be consumed just for the fact that queer people had a chance to see

themselves in media where their identities and voices were normally silenced or erased. The didactic importance of *I'll Get There* does not necessarily lie within its story, but rather of the effect it had on the young adult genre. It was the first queer young adult novel, and as such it had a positive effect that led to more queer young adult novels. What is also important about the novel is that it did not end negatively: Davy might have had a lot of doubts, but he did not suffer any extreme consequences as a result of his homosexual encounter with Altschuler.

Deliver Us From Evie not only shows a positive portrayal of a queer character, but also sends the message that it is wrong to condemn Evie because of her sexual orientation. The didactic consequences this novel might have is that it shows a young queer reader that people like Evie not only exist, but manage to thrive in society, as the ending clearly tells the reader that Evie is doing very well in New York with Patsy, while the small town they grew up in and were publicly attacked for being queer, is being flooded by a nearby river.

The three questions, as answered before, do not give a complete overview on the topic of queer young adult novels. As such, there are a few points to be improved upon when doing further research. The biggest limitation is the number of novels analysed: the three novels have been very important in the course of recent queer literary history, but including more novels in the research would be better when making generalised statements about socio-historical developments. This research is very limited in its scope, in that it only involves American novels. In order to broaden the scope of the research, novels outside of the United States could also be examined, as not every country follows the same route to emancipation. Furthermore, from an intersectional perspective, the three novels are not all that diverse. For example, the protagonists from the novels are all white, (upper-)middle class, and described as attractive – something that, according to Jenkins, is very common among characters in queer young adult novels. While the three novels in this research feature two female couples and one male couple, something can also be said about the prevalence of queer male

protagonists in comparison to queer female protagonists: “Gay male characters consistently outnumbered lesbian characters by a ratio of roughly three to one” (Jenkins 301). The fact that the characters in the three novels by Donovan, Packer and Kerr all fit within the category of the white, middle class character, can be ascribed to the authors’ own lives. The authors themselves are also white and homosexual, and thus it would take them little effort to imagine how life must be like for queer teenagers, as they have led those lives themselves. However, as the majority of novels feature characters with the same characteristics, a large amount of other identities are left underrepresented (Jenkins 302). For further research on this topic, it might be interesting to include a more diverse group of novels with main characters of different genders, ethnicities, skin colours, class, and other sexualities on the queer spectrum.

While not directly related to the topic of this paper, it is interesting to think about how the queer young adult genre would look in the future. When total socio-political equality has been achieved, would it still be necessary to write about queer themes and characters? The genre would not have any goal to work towards anymore, as people would presumably not have to be convinced of the legitimacy of one’s sexuality. In my opinion, it would still be necessary to keep writing novels that affirm someone’s identity. The goal is diversity, and even if there is equality across the board, this diversity has to be maintained. It would not do to stop writing about queer life, and to revert back to the heterosexual norm again, because in this way the queer literary genre would have to start all over again with representing the Other in a sea of novels representing the hegemonic Self. Thus, the slogan used by Queer Nation, a queer rights activist group, will be restated here, as it rings true for possible future scenarios as well: We’re here, we’re queer. Get used to it.

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