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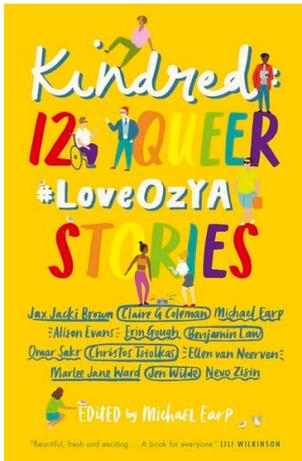
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TEXT Review

Queer visibility and belonging in YA

review by Chloe Cannell



Michael Earp (ed)

Kindred: 12 Queer #LoveOzYA Stories

Walker Books, Newtown NSW 2019

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Acknowledgement: this review was written on the lands of the Kurna people. I pay respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially Elders, past, present and emerging. Sovereignty was never ceded. This always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

‘Queer isn’t just a sexuality. It’s a fundamental viewpoint and different way of looking at the world.’ (283)

Kindred: 12 Queer #LoveOzYA Stories, edited by Michael Earp, is a landmark collection of Young Adult (henceforth YA) short stories from established and emerging authors in Australia. The quote above from Benjamin Law reflects the shared and diverse experiences and voices from the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, plus) community offered in the stories of this collection that unites these authors, this community and these stories beyond markers of identity. Sexuality and gender are the overarching link of these stories but, as the title suggests, kindred is the real theme as connections form and fracture between characters, whether they be romantic, sexual, familiar, friendship or platonic.

Many authors in the collection refer to or explore gender diversity and gender-neutral language in their stories. The use of pronouns is normalised in introductions between characters such as in Jax Jacki Brown's 'I Like Your Rotation'. In Jem Wilde's 'Waiting' characters wear badges with pronouns displayed on them and in Marlee Jane Ward's 'Rats' a side character is referred to with they and them pronouns. In Alison Evans's 'Stormlines', main non-binary characters Marling and New use gender neutral pronouns and later on Evans demonstrates how to correct pronouns in an interaction between Ver, New and another character Peony. Claire G Coleman offers a world where all gender is neutral in 'Sweet'. The story's namesake character Sweet discloses she is 'gendered' (125), 'to be precise, I am a woman, female' (126). The protagonist Roxy confronts their own gaps in knowledge thinking 'I was not sure what a gendered person was, had only heard rumours and dirty jokes about the gendered before' (127).

While it is great to see positive or neutral understandings of gender in these stories, Nevo Zisin's 'Light Bulb' and Omar Sakr's 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool' demonstrate misunderstandings based upon discrimination regarding gender and its connection to sexuality. The protagonist in 'Light Bulb' is bullied by their peers and called the gay f slur. They are confused by people's coding of their gender for arbitrary reasons, for example 'Cross my legs = girls, spread them out = boy' (148). Similarly, in 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool' Sakr shows how gender is frequently misperceived within the scope of heteronormativity. The protagonist Wafat is fearful of being viewed as feminine because his peers say his parents gave him a 'girl's name' (227). For this reason he felt that 'any kind of attention was dangerous' (233).

The stories in this collection present a range of coming of age narratives for its sexually diverse protagonists. One of the few characters in the collection to explicitly label their sexual identity is Audrey in 'Waiting' who states, 'I'm very bi' (160) to her new queer friends. Audrey's relaxed introduction of her bisexual identity, along with the other stories in this collection, challenges coming out narratives that conceive this process as the only storylines available to LGBTQIA+ characters (Henderson 2020). But Audrey's brief, 'coming out' experience with her new queer friends also helps young readers see how a

positive, single event shapes Audrey as a character, much like how these experiences, however brief or intense, shape an individual's experience in real life. The collection goes on to complicate traditional, often Western (Sanchez 2017), understandings of coming out in 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool' where Wafat is fearful of his attraction to Noah being discovered by anyone he knows. The use of derogatory language in the story reinforces the shame around his sexuality and its ties to faith. Law's 'Questions to Ask Straight Relatives' explores his personal experiences of being a gay man and confronting his own prejudices and internalised homophobia about 'That kind of gay' (280) referring to gay men with high-pitched voices often associated with female. Some authors in the collection play with romance fiction tropes, such as the queering of meet-cutes in Ward's 'Rats' and Erin Gough's 'In Case of Emergency, Break Glass' where protagonists first meet their romantic interests in unusual circumstances, like behind curtains at catered private parties and crashing into them with bikes. This collection resists a singular narrative for queer young people.

Family is represented in these stories not only as a legal or biological relationship but found family with trusted friends. In 'Rats', 'Sweet', 'Waiting', 'Each City' and 'Stormlines' the characters all have communities or kinship with friends. The stories promote loyalty and compassion based on unconditional love and support rather than familial obligation. For example, in 'Waiting' Audrey forms friendships with fellow queer fan kids and thinks 'I am welcome here' (170). The stories with families reject the YA trope of either absent or completely supportive parents by treating parents with as equal nuance as the teenage characters, like the fathers in 'Light Bulb' and 'I Like Your Rotation'. Both stories present supportive fathers who express their love and try to understand their child's experiences, even if they do not know their child's sexuality or gender identity. Law's story recounts his personal experiences with coming out in his family along with the cultural, generational and language barriers for older family members. On the other hand, 'Laura Nyro at the Wedding' and 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool' delve into more complex notions of family who may be, or may not be, deserving of constant presence in the protagonists' lives. Protagonist Jack, in 'Laura Nyro at the Wedding', has a tense relationship with his parents and sister because of the shared trauma of the devastating impact of his father's predatory behaviour had on their family, especially the suicide of his brother. Jack often unfairly compares himself to other families like his partner's loving immigrant family. For Wafat in 'An Arab Werewolf in Liverpool', he fears rejection after his parents abandoned him, and hiding his sexuality makes him feel like more of an outsider to the adults around him that make up his family, regardless of legal or biological relation. He wishes for 'a home that didn't resent him' (244). Most of the stories are a reminder of the importance of family, especially found family, for LGBTQIA+ young people.

The authors in *Kindred* have answered the call for more genre fiction featuring sexually and gender diverse characters for young people. This ranges from fantastical elements in Earp's

historical ‘Bitter Draught’, to a future drowned world in Evans’s ‘Stormlines’, as well as the psychological horror in Zisin’s ‘Light Bulb’, the contemporary realism like Brown’s ‘I Like Your Rotation’, and Law’s creative nonfiction ‘Questions to Ask Straight Relatives’. Ellen van Neerven, Ward and Coleman’s dystopian future stories ‘Each City’, ‘Rats’ and ‘Sweet’, respectively, complicate notions of power as the protagonists reject and evade authorities. Additionally, ‘Each City’ recognises Aboriginal activism by standing up to oppressive governments attempting to silencing their voices, beliefs and culture.

In addition to numerous genres, this anthology also adeptly explores adversity without it being a defining characteristic of queer lives. The stories deal with a range of issues including fandoms, toxic friendship, activism, disability pride, mental illness, unrequited love, sexual desire and more. Most of the stories are suitable for all high schoolers but overall the collection is best for 15 and above. If anything, Christos Tsiolkas’ ‘Laura Nyro at the Wedding’ is out of place in the collection because the twenty-something protagonist sympathises his father who is guilty of statutory rape. While the story is great at exploring the collection’s overarching theme of connection, the age of the main characters and difficult subject matters of ephebophilia, suicide, and tense couple and family conversations, could be distressing for readers and may be more suitable for New Adult [1] fiction than Young Adult. The anthology is bookended with Law’s ‘Questions to Ask Straight Relatives’ which is full of the quotes many rainbow young people, and older, will commit to memory. His story is a reminder of the possibilities of queerness and to question norms. He says,

Most of us take for granted that the world is supposed to operate in a certain way, and that things that are “typical” somehow equate to “good” or “normal”. Sometimes though it’s healthy to make the brain perform the mental gymnastics it needs to when simply asked, again and again, but-why, but-why, but-why. (279)

As Editor, Earp showcases his passion and expertise on YA and queer writing by curating twelve stories that beautifully speak to queer experiences. This anthology offers all readers, but particularly queer readers, the chance to see worlds that mirror their own and the opportunity to step into other worlds. The book also offers resources for queer teens which alongside these stories may be life saving for rainbow young people. Like how the first #LoveOzYA anthology *Begin, End, Begin* (Binks 2017) led to this queer anthology, I hope there will be more anthologies to follow showcasing more Australian YA authors as well as inspire readers to read more queer stories from the authors in this anthology.

Notes

[1] New Adult is a term for the literary category between Young Adult and Adult literature with protagonists aged 18 to 25 (Pattee 2017).

Works cited

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Chloe Cannell is a writer and PhD candidate at the University of South Australia. Her research interests include young adult literature, diversity in storytelling and queer writing. Since 2018 she has worked on the organising committee for the South Australian Gender, Sex and Sexualities Postgraduate and ECR Conference. Her research writing has been published in Writing From Below.