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Not a phase, but a fact: Reimagining queer girlhood in middle grade fiction

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Abstract:

Growing up queer in Fairhope, Alabama, I rarely saw myself reflected in the media I consumed. The characters I identified with—Jo in *Little Women*, Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*—were approximately, not explicitly queer. At most, they defied the patriarchy in their adolescence. Though children’s literature is now more LGBTQ+ inclusive, non-archetypal depictions of queer girlhood are still difficult to find. Because of this gap—and my personal connection to it—my two-part creative capstone seeks to reimagine the queer female protagonist. In the first half, I investigate existing depictions of queer trauma, queer joy, and queer girlhood. In the second, I begin writing an original work of fiction that is informed by my research. Ultimately, I attempt to answer the following question: *How can a deep understanding of queer trauma and queer joy—especially in relation to queer girlhood—translate into the creation of a middle grade novel?*

Keywords: LGBTQ+ inclusion, girlhood, middle grade fiction, queer storytelling, representation

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ABSTRACT

Growing up queer in Fairhope, Alabama, I rarely saw myself reflected in the media I consumed. The characters I identified with—Jo in *Little Women*, Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*—were approximately, not explicitly queer. At most, they defied the patriarchy in their adolescence. Though children’s literature is now more LGBTQ+ inclusive, non-archetypal depictions of queer girlhood are still difficult to find. Because of this gap—and my personal connection to it—my two-part creative capstone seeks to reimagine the queer female protagonist. In the first half, I investigate existing depictions of queer trauma, queer joy, and queer girlhood. In the second, I begin writing an original work of fiction that is informed by my research. Ultimately, I attempt to answer the following question: *How can a deep understanding of queer trauma and queer joy—especially in relation to queer girlhood—translate into the creation of a middle grade novel?*

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PREFACE

The first time I read about homosexuality, I nearly dropped my pink study Bible. It appeared under the header “Is This Okay?”, a Godly girl’s guide to tweenage temptations. I’d already perused the sections on swearing, cheating, and gossip—*not okay, not okay, not okay*. Now, I stared at another, more formidable question: *Is it okay to be friends with someone who is gay?* I took a breath before reading. I hoped that it was. If God had taken gay friends off the table, I would need to find a new group to sit with at lunch.

My stomach turned slightly as I scanned the page for answers. The authors quoted Leviticus, then delivered the verdict. *Gay acquaintances? Okay. Gay friends? Absolutely not.* I closed the Bible, knelt, and started bargaining with God. Maybe, if I didn’t swear, cheat, or gossip, He could find it in his heart to forgive a few friendships. Middle school faded into high school, and the memory did too.

Faded, that is, until the day I came out. I told my mother about my relationship, and she told me she loved me. She apologized for any undue religious trauma, and I assured her that it was fine, that I was okay. Then, I remembered that I wasn’t. I went to my room and pulled my Bible off the shelf. The “Is This Okay?” page was exactly as I’d remembered it—girly, flowery, and unabashedly homophobic. *Not okay*. Mom took the Bible out of my room and tucked it into the back of her closet. A few months later, she threw it away.

As I prepared to write this capstone, I began to wish she hadn’t. It loomed in my mind as the perfect primary source—the first time I’d seen myself represented, albeit unknowingly. I asked Mom to search for the Bible, then check again, just in case. Eventually, she told me to give up the goose chase.

“I think it’s gone, Peyton. And you know I wouldn’t have donated it.”

In an instant, her framing shifted my perspective. I imagined a world in which she’d given the Bible away.

I’m privileged to have grown up in an affirming environment. Ultimately, the *not okay* was drowned out by my family and friends. There are many readers—especially Southern, especially Christian—who cannot say the same. If my mother had donated that pink study Bible, it may have fallen into the hands of the kid who needed it least.

Since then, I’ve been thinking a lot about that kid. This capstone is for her. For me. For anyone who needs to read that just by being, they’re okay.

INTRODUCTION

Though often subject to “academic evasion and condescension,” children’s literature is anything but trivial.¹ The books that children read inform their prefatory perspectives, including their definitions of sex, gender, and sexuality. In “Creating Spaces for Boys and Girls To Expand Their Definitions of Masculinity and Femininity through Children's Literature,” Peggy Rice found that children who read about “nontraditional” protagonists were more willing to expand their definitions of masculinity and femininity.² B.J. Epstein reached a similar conclusion in “We’re Here, We’re (Not?) Queer: GLBTQ Characters in Children’s Books,” writing that “literature helps shape children’s experiences, intellects, imaginations, feelings, and thoughts, so what books they have access to and how these books are presented is an essential area of study.”³ I am passionate about LGBTQ+ inclusive children’s literature because of this all-encompassing potential. By changing the content that children are consuming, we might lay the groundwork for a more empathetic, flexible, and open-minded world.

Literature also enables readers to explore their positionalities. In her seminal work “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop describes the importance of diverse characters and stories. “Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us,” she writes, “and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the

¹ Beverly Lyon Clark. *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children’s Literature in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, 4.

² Peggy Sue Rice. “Texts and Talk: A Close Look at Gender in Literature Discussion Groups.” Book, Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College. Accessed September 27, 2022. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304426210/abstract/5AA7B7E14FEB473CPQ/1>.

³ B.J. Epstein. “We’re Here, We’re (Not?) Queer: GLBTQ Characters in Children’s Books.” *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 8, no. 3 (May 2012): 287–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2012.677241>.

larger human experience.”⁴ According to Dr. Bishop, this reflection can occur in three forms—mirrors (reflections of the reader’s identities), windows (glimpse into other identities), and sliding glass doors (invitations to imagination). Crucially, all three of these forms are important for every child; Dr. Bishop warns that if readers only interact with mirrors (e.g. if straight readers only read about straight characters), they may grow up with “an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world.”⁵ This nuance further elucidates the value of LGBTQ+ inclusive children’s fiction. It can be a mirror to queer youth, a window to prospective allies, and an accessible form of prefigurative politics.

Transformative potential aside, LGBTQ+ inclusive children’s fiction is far from perfect. Of the 10 picture books that have won a Stonewall Book Award since 2010, only 3 feature a named non-white protagonist.⁶ 2 of the 10 feature a named non-male. This phenomenon—the dominance of whiteness and patriarchy—extends far beyond award-winning books. I have read many stories about boys wearing dresses, but fewer about girls coming to terms with their queerness, for example. And, when queer girls are included, they are often portrayed as tomboys, pre-queer, and/or victims of homophobia. To be clear, none of these depictions are inherently inaccurate. There is no correct way to express or experience queerness, and homophobia can be extremely traumatic. At the same time, there are dimensions of queer girlhood that have yet to be explored. My experience—growing up queer and affirmed in a small town in Alabama—is one such gap in the field. I have been longing for a protagonist who is queer, joyful, and Southern. So, in this capstone, I attempt to write her myself.

⁴ Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*. (Vol. 6, No. 3), 1990.

⁵ Bishop.

⁶ “Stonewall Book Awards List | Round Tables.” Accessed February 28, 2023. <https://www.ala.org/rt/rrt/award/stonewall/honored>.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This capstone is situated at the intersection of the following bodies of scholarship: 1) representations of queer trauma and joy and 2) depictions of queer girlhood in children's literature. By bringing these areas into conversation, I hope to counter the dismissive and traumatic portrayals of queer girlhood that have historically dominated the genre. Additionally, I aim to answer the following research question: *How can a deep understanding of queer trauma and queer joy—especially in relation to queer girlhood—translate into the creation of a middle grade novel?*

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

In order to thoroughly investigate my research question, I divided the capstone into two parts: a scholarly essay and an original work of middle grade fiction. My scholarly essay explores the aforementioned bodies of scholarship. In it, I acquaint readers with the historical and emotional significance of my project, and I interrogate existing tropes so that I do not replicate them. I conclude the essay by deriving writing guidelines from my observations. These guidelines are specific to my research interests, but I am hopeful that they could inspire other authors too.

After condensing my research into an actionable framework, I started working on the creative component of the capstone. I chose a middle grade audience for several reasons. First and foremost, the most memorable books from my childhood fall into the middle grade category. They are among the first books that children select and enjoy independently, and they resonate

with those who are just learning how to “articulate their inner lives.”⁷ For some, these inner lives may be queer; according to the Pew Research Center, the median age at which a person first questions their sexuality is 12 years old.⁸ I am not exclusively writing for a LGBTQ+ audience, however. When viewed through the framework of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, all children can benefit from reading about a queer female protagonist. As Martha Nussbaum wrote in her exploration of the narrative imagination, “a child deprived of stories is deprived, as well, of certain ways of viewing other people.”⁹

My creative process was also informed by my personal experience. Like me, my protagonist is a queer girl growing up in the South. Like me, her life and childhood are simultaneously defined by and far larger than her queerness. While these characteristics are relatively uncommon in existing children’s literature, they are by no means the key to making an inclusive genre. Like me, my protagonist is white, cisgender, able-bodied, and middle-class. In other words, she is a drop in the bucket in the project of representation. All that I can do is to tell my story, and my story alone. It will be a mirror to some, a window to many, and a sliding glass door for whoever is looking for it.

⁷ Maughan, Shannon. “Navigating Middle Grade Books.” PublishersWeekly.com. Accessed October 29, 2022. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/76625-navigating-middle-grade.html>.

⁸ “Chapter 3: The Coming Out Experience | Pew Research Center.” Accessed October 31, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/06/13/chapter-3-the-coming-out-experience/>.

⁹ Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjghth8>

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

REPRESENTATIONS OF QUEER TRAUMA AND JOY

“My GOD they have killed us in every possible way.”¹⁰

In March of 2016, a blogger by the name of Riese published a list of “All 225 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters on TV, and How They Died.” The causes of death range from the mundane (heart attacks, car wrecks, and cancers) to the extreme (beheadings, electrocutions, and aliens).¹¹ All of the characters are openly queer, and all of them are dead. The comment above is one of many that mourns the losses—and the short-lived representation. According to Riese, the deaths are part of a broader trend. “Gay and lesbian characters are so often murdered on television that we have our very own trope: Bury Your Gays,” she writes. “We comprise such a teeny-tiny fraction of characters on television to begin with that killing us off so haphazardly feels especially cruel.”¹² While Riese is correct to situate her list within the Bury Your Gays phenomenon, her assessment of the writers’ culpability misses the mark.¹³ The death of a lesbian or bisexual character may be cruel, but it is far from haphazard.

Instead, Bury Your Gays is a legacy of homophobia in Hollywood. It has roots in The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930—also known as the Hays Code—which was written by a Presbyterian minister and championed by conservative Christians.¹⁴ In it, Hays described filmmakers’ “moral obligation” to create “entertainment which tends to improve the race,” as

¹⁰ Nova Duarte Martinez. May 14, 2021 (6:46 p.m.). Comment on Riese. “All 225 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters on TV, and How They Died.” *Autostraddle* (blog).

¹¹ Riese. “[All 225 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters on TV, and How They Died.](#)” *Autostraddle* (blog). March 31, 2022.

¹² Riese, 2022.

¹³ TV Tropes. “[Bury Your Gays.](#)”

¹⁴ Sophie Cleghorn. “[Film: The Hollywood Production Code of 1930 and LGBT Characters.](#)” *Medium* (blog), November 8, 2017; “Queer and Now: Representation in American Film,” (Unpublished thesis). Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas (2021), 7.

well as thirty-six guidelines for uplifting, rather than corrupting, the audience.¹⁵ The guidelines prohibited a variety of plots, characters, and locations: suggestive dancing, likable criminals, and filming in brothels, among others.¹⁶ They also restricted the scope of on-screen relationships. In the “Plot Material” section of the code, Hays wrote:

Impure love, the love of a man and woman forbidden by human and divine law, must be presented in such a way that:

- a) It is clearly known by the audience to be wrong;
- b) Its presentation does not excite sexual reactions, mental or physical, in an ordinary audience;
- c) It is not treated as matter for comedy.¹⁷

Given the prevalence of sodomy laws, the mention of “divine law,” and an addendum to the code that specifically prohibited “sex perversion,” it is clear that queer relationships fell within Hays’s definition of “impure love.”¹⁸ And, because the Hays Code was adopted by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, his conflation of homosexuality with immorality was immortalized in film.¹⁹ LGBTQ+ characters were represented as “comical relief characters, irredeemable villains, or tragic characters that pay for their perverse lifestyle with death”—that is, if they were represented at all.²⁰

The Hays Code was dropped in the 1960s, but all of these tropes have persisted in mainstream media. Nowadays, they are recognizable as the Gay Best Friend, the Depraved

¹⁵ Thomas Doherty, “Appendix A: The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930,” *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema; 1930-1934*, 2nd Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). 348.

¹⁶ Doherty, 356-358.

¹⁷ Doherty, 355.

¹⁸ Weinmeyer, Richard. “The Decriminalization of Sodomy in the United States.” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 16, no. 11 (November 1, 2014): 916–22.

<https://doi.org/10.1001/virtualmentor.2014.16.11.hlaw1-1411>.

¹⁹ Long, 7.

²⁰ Brianna Dym, Jed R. Brubaker, Casey Fiesler, and Bryan Semaan. “‘Coming Out Okay’: Community Narratives for LGBTQ Identity Recovery Work.” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, no. CSCW (November 7, 2019): 1–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3359256>.

Homosexual, and cruelly, *Bury Your Gays*.²¹ Take, for example, the highly anticipated conclusion to BBC thriller, *Killing Eve* (2018-2022). Fans spent four seasons following the relationship between Eve and Villanelle—an agent and assassin who are obsessed (or perhaps, infatuated) with one another. In the final minutes of the finale, the characters share a passionate kiss. Then, Villanelle is killed by a sniper. Eve screams, and the words “The End” appear on the screen. And with that, another queer relationship ends in death. Fans were vocal about their disappointment, exhaustion, and frustration. One tweeted, “the writers not only betrayed the audience, but also the characters.... They deserved so much better. We deserved so much better.”²²

Of course, queer stories are not confined to the screen. LGBTQ+ characters in print media are written into tragedy too. Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) contains some of the first mainstream representations of queer female relationships. The protagonist, Stephen, finds love with her soulmate, Mary, and community with another lesbian couple, Barbara and Jaime. Ultimately, these connections are more traumatic than fulfilling. Barbara dies of illness, Jaime commits suicide, and Stephen chooses to separate herself from Mary so that Mary can “escape the stigma of lesbianism.”²³ Even so—and despite being repeatedly banned—*The Well of Loneliness* became an international best-seller. *Giovanni’s Room* by James Baldwin (1956) is another harrowing classic. In it, the protagonist struggles to come to terms with his sexuality, and

²¹ TV Tropes. “Gay Best Friend.” Accessed November 8, 2022.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GayBestFriend>; TV Tropes. “Depraved Homosexual.” Accessed November 8, 2022.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DepravedHomosexual>.

²² Nast, Condé. “Killing Eve Fans Hated the Finale—But They’re Taking the Final Word for Themselves.” *Vanity Fair*, April 13, 2022.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/04/killing-eve-finale-backlash>.

²³ Michael Cart.. *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*. Scarecrow Press, 2006.

by the end of the novel, his lover is set to be executed.²⁴ These deaths differ from those cataloged by Riese in that Hall and Baldwin were identifiably queer; likely, *The Well of Loneliness* and *Giovanni's Room* reflect suffering that the authors experienced or witnessed. As a result, the novels occupy a troublesome position. They are valuable contributions to the LGBTQ+ canon, but they perpetuate the linkage of queerness and trauma.

A similar linkage is present in early LGBTQ+ children's literature. In the “Using and Losing Queer Youth” chapter of *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children's Literature*, Eric Tribunella describes queerness as something characters “sacrifice” to reach maturity. He writes:

Both Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) and Frederic Farrar's *Eric, or Little by Little* (1858), two prototypical school stories, involve boys being encouraged to form intimate same-sex friendships before one of the boys is lost or nearly lost through illness or death. The outcome of the boys' school story is usually the successful manhood of the protagonist, who leaves behind school and the friend he associates with childhood.²⁵

In this example, LGBTQ+ characters must give something up—in this case, their friends and friends' lives—because they are queer. This loss is not just a trauma, but a coming of age. In Tribunella's words, it is a “catalyst for melancholic maturation.”²⁶ Katelyn Browne investigates this temporality in “Reimagining Queer Death in Young Adult Fiction.”²⁷ She hypothesizes that if “queerness and adolescence are intrinsically linked,” and “queerness is perceived as being incompatible with adulthood,” then “the work of adolescence requires bringing about its own

²⁴ Cart, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*.

²⁵ Eric Tribunella. *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children's Literature*. Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2010.

²⁶ Eric Tribunella, 1.

²⁷ Browne, Katelyn R. “Reimagining Queer Death in Young Adult Fiction” *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* 2, no.2 (2020): 26.

end.” In other words, if queerness is something that a person must work *through*, they will eventually have to grow out of it.

When coupled with the world-shaping power of children’s literature, these traumatic tropes are disturbing. Tribunella calls them a “self-fulfilling prophecy at the cultural level,” in which young readers learn to associate queerness with suffering, so accept and perpetuate it in their daily lives.²⁸ This association can be detrimental to adults, too. In her open letter to marginalized communities, Eve Tuck describes the repercussions of “damage-centered” research.²⁹ She explains that solely studying “pain and brokenness” is a flawed “theory of change,” since it ultimately “reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless.”³⁰ Though Tuck is primarily addressing Indigenous organizers, she draws on the work of queer thinkers to formulate her analysis. In her call for “desire-based” (rather than “damaged-based”) research, she quotes Craig Gingrich-Philbrook’s “Autoethnography’s Family Values”:

I decided to write more about the gratifications of same-sex relationships, to depict intimacy and desire, the kinds of subjugated knowledges we don’t get to see on the afterschool specials and movies of the week that parade queer bruises and broken bones, but shy away from the queer kiss.³¹

Crucially, this desire-based approach does not have to be sexual. It can also manifest as queer flourishing and joy. Stories about queer joy are beginning to garner critical acclaim—at the time of writing, *Heartstopper* and *A League of Their Own* are being celebrated for de-centering

²⁸ Eric Tribunella, 19.

²⁹ Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (October 6, 2009): 408, <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>.

³⁰ Tuck, 408.

³¹ Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, “Autoethnography’s Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (October 1, 2005): 297–314.

queer trauma—but they have yet to pervade academic discourse about media.³² Studies about joy *are* appearing in adjacent disciplines, however. In “The Art of Ridicule: Black Queer Joy in the Face of Fatigues,” Reagan Patrick Mitchell approaches the subject intersectionally. He describes the compounding effects of racial and queer battle fatigue, and explains that in a cisheteropatriarchal, white supremacist society, Black queer joy is the ultimate act of resistance.³³ “Reducing the Joy Deficit in Sociology: A Study of Transgender Joy” is another exploration of gaiety. Its authors asked trans people to share what they loved about being trans, arguing that there is sociological value in studying non-traumatic experiences.³⁴ Though this project is about a different topic, it follows similar lines of reasoning. I want to show readers that there is joy in the margins, and that the LGBTQ+ experience is beautiful, even when complicated.

At the same time, I am wary of toxic positivity. In her cultural critique *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed describes the history and effects of the “happiness duty.”³⁵ She explains that happiness can be twisted into a tool of oppression—especially when expected at all times, in all circumstances, no matter the cost. She also zeroes in on the importance of “unhappy queers,” writing that “the risk of promoting happy queers is that the unhappiness of this world can disappear from view.”³⁶ In part because of these complications, I do not intend to write a story in

³² Max Hovey. “[Opinion: Heartstopper Is a Win for Queer People – It’s Not All about Our Trauma.](#)” *The Independent*, April 30, 2022; Elliot Kwabena Akosa, “[A League of Their Own Explores Black Trans Joy in Ways Other Shows Have Never Succeeded.](#)” *GAY TIMES*, September 16, 2022.

³³ Reagan Patrick Mitchell, “The Art of Ridicule: Black Queer Joy in the Face of the Fatigues,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 35, no. 9 (October 21, 2022): 943–59;

³⁴ Stef M Shuster and Laurel Westbrook, “Reducing the Joy Deficit in Sociology: A Study of Transgender Joy,” *Social Problems*, June 6, 2022.

³⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness, The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822392781>.

³⁶ Sara Ahmed, 89.

which the characters are always happy; such a novel would be not only inauthentic, but boring. Rather, I hope to provide a story for middle grade readers in which queerness is not repeatedly linked to trauma.

As I realized that queer joy was (and is) understudied, I turned to an alternative site of knowledge production: poetry. One of my favorites, “small delights that speak i was here,” captures the thrust of this essay better than any academic source. First, the poet reflects on queer trauma:

the active constant of coming out as myself does not always create joy for me. it has led to anger, further closeted moments and the brutality of institutional indifference. it is tiring to position and reposition myself and my identity as a survival tool.³⁷

Then, they turn to joy:

the moments that are drastically important to me right now are small but significant. they involve crafting and cultivating little joys around me... and in cultivating these interpersonal joys around myself, i hope i can leave them in my wake for those around me, as little moments and small delights that speak i was here.³⁸

In the story I write, queerness will be a source of small delights—moments of euphoria, comfort, and peace. It will not be sacrificed or outgrown, and my characters will not grapple with “the active constant of coming out.”³⁹

Though I am consciously stepping away from a damage-based framework, I do not see myself as working in opposition to authors who write about pain. Homophobia and transphobia are rampant and devastating, and stories about suffering can be just as cathartic as those about joy. Instead, I am adding a single voice to a growing choir—a voice that explores the joys of queer girlhood.

³⁷ Ro Hardaker, “small delights that speak i was here,” *Over there: A queer anthology of joy* (Pilot Press, 2017).

³⁸ Hardaker, “small delights that speak i was here.”

³⁹ Hardaker, “small delights that speak i was here.”

DEPICTIONS OF QUEER GIRLHOOD

The girl is an assemblage of social and cultural issues and questions rather than a field of physical facts, however much the girl's empirical materiality is crucial to that assemblage.⁴⁰

Above, Catherine Driscoll defines "girl" in the inaugural volume of *Girlhood Studies*. Driscoll's definition is purposefully expansive. In her words, "girl culture is as contained and productive, as predictable and contingent, as the category of 'girl' itself."⁴¹ *Girlhood Studies* is an interdisciplinary, rapidly growing, and media-focused area of study. For her part, Driscoll explores the definition of "girl" via depictions of girlhood in popular culture over time.

Queerness notwithstanding, cisgender female characters in children's books face a number of obstacles. Male protagonists appear more frequently than female protagonists, and books with male protagonists are more likely to sell.⁴² Furthermore, when women *are* featured, they speak less, have less exciting roles, and are less likely to take the lead.⁴³ A content analysis of six retellings of Cinderella revealed that "when female characters demonstrated traditionally feminine traits, she typically lost some agency."⁴⁴ Characters who demonstrated traditionally masculine traits, on the other hand, were depicted as brave, assertive decision-makers.⁴⁵ In

⁴⁰ Catherine Driscoll, "Girls Today - Girls, Girl Culture and Girl Studies," *Girlhood Studies* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2008): 13, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2008.010103>.

⁴¹ Driscoll, 28.

⁴² Kennedy Casey, Kylee Novick, and Stella F. Lourenco, "Sixty Years of Gender Representation in Children's Books: Conditions Associated with Overrepresentation of Male versus Female Protagonists," *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 12 (December 15, 2021): e0260566, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260566>.

⁴³ Ellen E. Kneeskern, Patricia A. Reeder. "Examining the impact of fiction literature on children's gender stereotypes." *Current Psychology* 41, 1472–1485 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-020-00686-4>

⁴⁴ Rylee Carling, "Damsel in Distress or Princess in Power? Traditional Masculinity and Femininity in Young Adult Novelizations of Cinderella and the Effects on Agency," *Proquest*. 91.

⁴⁵ Carling, 91.

“Moms Do Badly, but Grandmas Do Worse: The Nexus of Sexism and Ageism in Children’s Classics,” researchers found that gendered stereotypes intensify as characters age; they concluded that if female elders survive the “dead mother plot,” they are typically portrayed as “1) selfish, evil, or vain crones, 2) self-sacrificial women-saviors, and 3) ineffectual or demented grannies.”⁴⁶ These misogynistic tropes are not present in every book and character, but they still contribute to the “symbolic annihilation” of women and girls.⁴⁷

Queer characters are flattened by an additional set of stereotypes. Whitney Monaghan’s “Not Just a Phase: Queer Girlhood and Coming of Age Onscreen” explores this niche. Like Tribunella and Browne—previously discussed in the section on queer trauma and joy—Monaghan is critical of fleeting depictions of queerness, writing:

Girl characters are not allowed to imagine queer futures because their queerness is limited strictly to a temporary phase of adolescence and resolved so that they can mature into adult womanhood.⁴⁸

In other words, womanhood and queerness are often shown to be incompatible.

Monaghan then explains that when queerness is *not* portrayed as a phase, it is typically used to drive a coming out as coming of age.⁴⁹ On its own, this narrative is not problematic. Many queer individuals view coming out as an important milestone, and for some, it aligns with adolescent identity formation. Instead, the problem lies in the oversaturation of the trope. If every queer story is about coming out, readers may do so before they are ready, without consideration for their own safety, and/or as a means to explain themselves to a straight audience. Once their queer

⁴⁶ Sylvia Henneberg, “Moms Do Badly, but Grandmas Do Worse: The Nexus of Sexism and Ageism in Children’s Classics,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 24, no. 2 (April 1, 2010): 125–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2008.10.003>.

⁴⁷ Henneberg, 126.

⁴⁸ Monaghan, 101.

⁴⁹ Whitney Monaghan. "Not Just a Phase", *Girlhood Studies* 12, 1 (2019): 98-113, accessed Oct 4, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2019.120109>

identity is out in the open, they may not be able to control where the information travels—hence, “the active constant of coming out.”

The tomboy archetype is another dominant trope. These characters—among the most celebrated in classic children’s literature—are beloved for “eschewing the feminine and expressing masculine identifications and desires.”⁵⁰ Because of this, they are often claimed by the queer community, even when they are not explicitly queer. Rachel Walsh explores this double bind in her analysis of tomboys and queer time:

The tomboy is both permitted queerness as it is allowed to transcend white cisheteropatriarchal structures of gender in a way that is considered natural and appropriate in childhood and is simultaneously denied queerness by being confined to childhood. The tomboy embodies the threat to turn queer to the highest degree, but it simultaneously never actually turns queer; it is bubbling—really, almost bursting—with queer potential.⁵¹

Given the scope of this essay, it is impossible to evaluate every character that is “bursting” with queer potential. So, for the remainder of this section, I limit my analysis to two characters that I encountered as a young reader: Jo March from *Little Women* and Scout Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Both of these characters are white and cisgender. They are therefore comparable to (and perhaps, precursors for) the protagonist that I am going to write—and by no means representative of the entire queer experience. As in the rest of this essay, I do not intend to twist a case study into a universal truth. Instead, I aim to explore a pair of famous characters that I related to when growing up and to distill a few takeaways that are applicable to this project.

⁵⁰ Karin Quimby, “The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, *Little Women*, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 1–22.

⁵¹ Rachel McLaughlin Walsh, “‘I Can’t Get over My Disappointment in Not Being a Boy’: An Analysis of the Tomboy and Queer Time in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*” (M.A., United States -- District of Columbia, The George Washington University, 2022), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2677005026/abstract/877FC74BF0DB4800PQ/1>.

Jo March “can’t get over her disappointment in not being a boy.”⁵² She longs to join the Union army, amuses Laurie with her “gentlemanly demeanor,” and imagines herself as the “man of the family” while her father is away.⁵³ In contrast to her older sister, who enjoys dressing up for social events, Jo hides in a “curtained recess” to avoid the gaze of potential dance partners.⁵⁴ She uses slang, loves being outdoors, and prefers boots to heels. As a child who hated frills, I loved every bit of her character—loved her, that is, until the end of the story. In accordance with her family’s wishes, Jo “conquer[s] [her]self beautifully.”⁵⁵ She settles down, marries a man, has children, and opens a boarding school. Given Jo’s dynamic characterization, this conclusion is unsatisfying. Even Louisa May Alcott, author of *Little Women*, recognized that if it were not for pressure from the publishers, Jo would have remained a literary spinster.⁵⁶ Some analysts, like Karen Quimby, encourage readers to cherish “the queer middle” of the novel, since “meanings do not line up into a seamless, univocal whole.”⁵⁷ I agree with Quimby that there is more to a story than its ending, but, I will never forget my disappointment that one of my favorite characters had outgrown herself.

Scout Finch is another famous literary tomboy. Throughout *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she mimics her father and brother, swears, and insists on wearing overalls.⁵⁸ Her discomfort with traditional gender roles is complicated by the novel’s setting—Maycomb, Alabama—where

⁵² Kristin Colonna, “Girlhood with Grit: The Tomboy ‘Other’ in Twentieth Century Literature of the American South” (masters, Radford University, 2015), <http://wagner.radford.edu/221/>.

⁵³ Walsh, “‘I Can’t Get over My Disappointment in Not Being a Boy’: An Analysis of the Tomboy and Queer Time in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*.”

⁵⁴ Quimby, “The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, *Little Women*, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire,” 8.

⁵⁵ Walsh, 36.

⁵⁶ Walsh, 38.

⁵⁷ Quimby, 4.

⁵⁸ Colonna, “Girlhood with Grit.”

“[I]adies bathed before noon, after their three o’clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum.”⁵⁹ To Scout, this Southern belle archetype is utterly repulsive. To her Aunt Alexandra, it is the only path to legitimate womanhood. Their opposite perspectives are a source of humorous conflict within the novel; Aunt Alexandra tells Scout that she ought to “be a ray of sunshine in [her] father’s lonely life,” and Scout responds that she can “be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well.”⁶⁰ In *Go Set a Watchman*, sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the contrast between them is far less pronounced. By then, a 26-year-old Scout goes by her given name (Jean Louise), considers marrying a childhood friend, and attempts to make small talk at Aunt Alexandra’s parties. She is clearly uncomfortable, but does not have the opportunity to escape, so resigns herself to the boredom. When I read about Scout’s predicament in middle school, I wondered if I, too, would be haunted by Southern femininity. Either way, Maycomb seemed eerily similar to my hometown.

In sum, both Jo and Scout are known for challenging the traditional definitions of femininity, but neither character is given the opportunity to be explicitly queer. Moreover, neither character is shown to retain their tomboyish qualities after growing up. Karen Quimby elaborates on the significance of this temporality:

In narrative, the demand that the tomboy exchange her overalls for a dress to signal her availability for heterosexual romance is a clear attempt to "order" her "precarious" gender development into an acceptable heterosexual narrative framework.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 11; Laura Hakala, “Scouting for a Tomboy: Gender-Bending Behaviors in Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird*,” 2010, 8.

⁶⁰ Harper Lee, 89; Hakala, 8.

⁶¹ Quimby, 2.

In my story, my protagonist will undergo no such transformation. She will be outwardly queer from beginning to end, and she will never be conquered, ordered, or stabilized. I will also take care not to conflate sexuality with gender expression. Some cisgender queer women prefer a masculine presentation, and others do not—and preferences often change. I, for one, feel tomboyish some days and feminine others. With this spectrum, fluidity, and personal experience in mind, I hope to create a queer female protagonist who is more complex than any single archetype.

OBSERVATIONS AND GUIDELINES

Based on my literature review of queer trauma, joy, and girlhood, I formulated four guidelines to follow while writing. **These guidelines are not comprehensive**; stories that follow them are not necessarily uplifting, and stories that do not are not inherently traumatizing. Instead, they reflect the observations that I found most compelling and the conclusions that were poised to meaningfully shape my writing.

<i>OBSERVATION</i> : There are many...	<i>GUIDELINE</i> : So, I will...
... stories in which coming out is the catalyst for a queer character's coming of age.	... de-center coming out as a major queer milestone.
... stories in which queer characters experience conflict and/or trauma <i>because</i> of their queerness.	... introduce conflict that does not revolve around queer characters defending or questioning their identities.
... stories in which young, female-identified characters are pre-queer, rather than fully queer.	... create a character who is sure of her identity from a young age—or at least comfortable with fluidity.
... stories in which queer girls are assumed to be tomboys (and vice versa).	... draw from my personal experience to create a protagonist who does not fit into any single archetype.

WRITING *BETWEEN YOU AND ME*

Between You and Me is the story of 12-year-old January: a queer female protagonist and self-proclaimed liar. From the first lines of the first chapter, her obsession with honesty is clear:

Between you and me, I might be a bad person. It's not official, I guess, but it feels as true as anything. What else would you call someone who can't stop lying?

This quasi-confession is the driving force of the novel. Chapters 2-3 are situated “FOUR MONTHS BEFORE THE LIE,” creating suspense as to what January did wrong.

January's queerness, on the other hand, is a source of small delights. She has a crush on her teacher, Mrs. Dreyfuss, who asks her to alphabetize her classmates' papers. Eventually, an overwhelmed Mrs. Dreyfuss will ask for help with grading, too. January will agree and bask in the feeling of closeness. She is already extremely close to her mother, so she adores being privileged with private information.

At the end of Chapter 3, January meets Isla, her classmate and love interest. She is immediately smitten, and she is disheartened to learn that Isla feels pressure to do well in class. In future chapters, January will use her position of power to change Isla's grades. She will then lie about her actions to Mrs. Dreyfuss, her mother, and Isla herself, until a school-wide honors ceremony forces her to come clean.

In accordance with my guidelines, January's crush on Isla is not the central conflict of the story. She does not question the attraction, and there is no coming out scene. Instead, she is conflicted by decisions she makes *because* she has the crush. This distinction is at the heart of my capstone, so is fundamental to the structure of the novel. January is a queer adolescent struggling to navigate loyalty and secrecy, but her queerness is neither up for debate, nor entangled in her confusion.

CONCLUSION

My journey to self-acceptance has been a long and winding path. To this day, LGBTQ+ inclusive children's literature makes me emotional. I can only imagine what it would have meant to me when I was growing up. As I finish my degree and begin a career in education, I am determined to help young queer readers feel safe, seen, and included. When they read my work—*Between You and Me* or otherwise—they will never have to ask: *Is this okay?*

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Between You and Me

CHAPTER 1: Honest Abe & Oreos

Between you and me, I might be a bad person. It's not official, I guess, but it feels as true as anything. What else would you call someone who can't stop lying?

Even my name is a lie: January. An odd name for a baby born in June. Mom says she picked it because when I was born, the room was so hot she couldn't think straight. I'm not sure what she expected when she moved to Alabama.

When Mom brought me home from the hospital, Eden wasn't impressed. Actually, her name is a lie too. It's supposed to mean "paradise," but Eden took one look at my still-shriveled-up face and started screaming so loud Mr. Merrell heard her from his porch. He says he's never heard anything like it, not even that time Mrs. Merrell found a roach in her slow cooker. So much for a paradise.

If you asked me a few months ago, I'd have told you that Eden was the bad one. She and Mom fight constantly, and nowadays, she can do more than scream. She likes to smirk when Mom raises her voice, which makes Mom louder, which makes Eden smirk-ier. Mom says she's happy that I don't do that. I'm her January. Her escape from the heat. Or at least, I used to be.

For the record, I was once better, I think. I dressed up as President Lincoln last Halloween, just because I liked the nickname "Honest Abe."

“You’re such a dweeb,” Eden groaned, pulling me from house to house. With each fistful of candy, she unloaded a new insult.

“It’s the one day you can be anything, literally anything, and you pick a dead guy in a top hat.”

Snickers. Reese’s Cups.

“Honestly, January. No way you make it to middle school.”

Skittles. Milky Way.

“And that beard looks stupid, by the way. Like something crawled onto your face and died.”

It kind of smelled like it too, but I didn’t tell Eden. Instead, I saved every detail for Mom.

Back then, I told Mom everything—and I mean everything. I couldn’t stand the idea of her not knowing what I knew, especially because she shared so much with me. I knew who hated who in her Bible study, who did what at the office. When she started a story with “I probably shouldn’t be telling you this,” I felt like I grew at whole two inches taller.

I tried to return the favor—telling Mom about Anna Margaret’s crush on Brooks, how Mrs. Dreyfuss caught them passing notes in the hall—but they didn’t have the same effect. The only stories she *really* listened to were the ones about Eden, so I told them, and

told them often. Eden stuffing clothes into her closet when she swore she was cleaning her room. Eden sneaking out of the house when Mom asked us to bring in groceries. If I saw it, I told. If I didn't, I spied.

When Eden caught me, she responded in her usual way: some yelling, some stomping, a slammed door or two. I didn't mind much, especially when Mom was around. She'd look at me—*This again?*—and I'd nod back—*I know, right?*—and it was almost as good as the stories that she said she shouldn't tell. The only thing that ruined it was when Eden noticed us looking. Once, when Mom went after Oreos that she stole from the No-Kids-Allowed cabinet, Eden lingered in the kitchen until I looked her in the eye.

"You're supposed to be my sister."

She said it quietly, which was worse somehow. I stared at the floor, crossing and uncrossing my toes. I wished that she'd leave, or that I could magically melt into the tile. Neither wish came true, so I said the only thing I could think of.

"I *am* your sister. I'm *supposed* to tell the truth."

And I did. Then, I lied.

FOUR MONTHS BEFORE THE LIE

CHAPTER 2: Lining Up & Walking Back

“Do you think he likes paisley?”

Anna Margaret twirled the handle of her blue paisley lunchbox, craning her neck so she could see down the hall. We had to line up before walking to lunch, which had been annoying in 5th grade, but was unbearable in 6th. I longed for the open halls of Anniston Middle, where the sound of the bell would really mean freedom. Eden said passing period was the best part of the day.

“I doubt he knows what paisley is, to be honest.”

Anna Margaret shrugged, but she didn't turn around. She was still staring down the hallway, towards the door to Mrs. Todd's class. One by one, kids filed out, forming their own line against the cinderblock wall. Brooks was in the middle of the pack.

“January. I see him.”

I was glad she wasn't facing me, so she couldn't see me roll my eyes. I liked Brooks just fine, but I was tired of hearing about him. Anna Margaret had been obsessed ever since 3rd grade. He'd stopped to check on her when she tripped while running the mile, and he still finished a full 30 seconds before everyone else. Anna Margaret came back from the nurse's office with gauze on her knee and a gleam in her eye.

“He’s talking to Holden, I think. Or maybe that’s Hunter? I still can’t tell them apart, I’ll have to ask Brooks how he does it. He looks a little sunburned, don’t you think? I wonder if he’s still doing socc-”

“Anna Margaret.”

Mrs. Dreyfuss had taken her place at the front of the line, Lean Cuisine in hand. Her tone was stern, which made Anna Margaret’s ears turn red, but she didn’t say anything else, which I liked. It was still early in the year, so I hadn’t quite figured her out. So far, I knew that she had a wife and no kids, that she drank out of a water bottle that was bigger than my head, and that she packed Lean Cuisines for lunch. She had a few different lanyards (which she changed to match her outfit), but she always wore the same pair of bluey-green glasses.

“She’s nice, but she’s barely older than Eden,” Mom had said after Meet the Teacher. “It seems like they’re letting just anyone teach.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant, but before I could ask, Mom was complaining about the price of pronged folders. I mulled it over as I clambered into the humid backseat. Barely older than Eden? There was no way. Eden had just gotten her learner’s permit, and Mrs. Dreyfuss was old enough to be a full Mrs. And she wasn’t just anyone—of that much I was sure. You have to be *someone* to pick bluey-green glasses.

I must have been staring, because Mrs. Dreyfuss caught my eye. She smiled at me from the front of the

line, and my ears turned red to match Anna Margaret's. I smiled back, crinkly eyes and all, until she turned around to lead us to the cafeteria. I wondered if she knew what paisley was, and if she did, whether or not she liked it.

—

P.E. was right after lunch, which I hadn't figured out yet, either. I hated feeling over-full, especially because it was August: 100 degrees and 100% humidity. As soon as I stepped outside, my stomach started hurting and my skin got sticky. Gross.

“It's week two, y'all. Y'should know the drill.”

Coach Garrett slid into his golf cart and gestured toward The Field.

“Just because we know it, doesn't mean we like it,” Anna Margaret whispered. She rolled her eyes dramatically, but started walking with the rest of us. A few kids ran after Coach Garrett as he sped away from the sidewalk.

We called it The Field because there was nothing else to call it. The grass was yellow and prickly, as if it had been fried by the sun. Further down, there was a corn field, and eventually, the highway. I always kept an eye out for Mom's car, even though there was no way she'd ever be able to see me.

The little kids got to use the shaded jungle gym, but out in The Field, we were equipment-less. Usually,

someone started a game of tag or Red Rover or Bubblegum, Bubblegum, and Coach Garrett said he didn't care, as long as we were moving. He also said the emptiness was good for our imaginations. I thought it probably had more to do with budget cuts.

No matter the game, I always chose to walk. I started on the highway side of The Field, then made giant squares until it was time to go. Sometimes, Anna Margaret joined me, but usually, she didn't. I got in the habit of bringing my book to lunch so that P.E wouldn't be a total waste of time.

Anna Margaret knew everyone—and everything about everyone. She floated between groups and games, combing The Field for gossip. If it were anyone else, Sadie Jernigan would have tattled to Coach Garrett, but Anna Margaret could get away with just about anything. She had a way of making you feel like you were the most special person in the world, but I was her best friend, so I knew it was true.

We didn't look much alike—I could get a sunburn from a camera flash, and Anna Margaret finished summer with a glowy tan—but we liked to joke that we were twins. A few months before I was born, when Mom was trying to pick out a stroller, Anna Margaret's mom was in the right aisle at the right time. They bonded over their big bellies, and the fact that they were about to have daughters. Mom says she could feel me kicking as they exchanged phone numbers.

Ever since then, Anna Margaret was a fact of life. She was my bunkmate at summer camp and my co-star in music videos. We had inside jokes, matching pajamas, and three joint birthday parties—three and a half, if you count Anna-Margaret-and-January’s-Half- Birthday-Half-Christmas-Spectacular. Eden couldn’t stand her.

Once, when Anna Margaret’s parents were furnishing their new beach house, Anna Margaret stayed at our place for a week. I worried that she’d be annoyed by how often we ate leftovers, but she said that Mom’s cooking was so good, it was worth eating twice. She and Mom got along like a house on fire. Anna Margaret laughed at her jokes, complimented her earrings, and offered to help with the dishes. Eden rolled her eyes each and every time.

“It’s just fake, January! No one is *that* nice.”

I knew she was wrong, so I didn’t know why she cared. At the very least, Anna Margaret didn’t make Mom upset.

—

“January! You’ll never believe it!”

At the sound of Coach Garrett’s whistle, Anna Margaret broke away from a group of kickballers. She jogged across The Field so we could walk back together.

“Never believe what?”

“Y’know how Sadie’s mom is in the front office? So can see class lists and papers and stuff?”

I did know, and Anna Margaret knew that I knew, but she was never one to rush a big reveal.

“Yeah? And?”

“Well yesterday, Sadie had to stay after until Mrs. Jernigan finished filing, and she overheard her saying that they’re adding a new teacher. She thinks they found someone to take Mrs. Arnold’s spot.”

Mrs. Arnold had disappeared a week before school started. Mom said it was because her test scores were too low to ignore, but the front office claimed she was ready to retire. Either way, they’d been forced to turn eight 6th grade classes into seven, and the custodians couldn’t find space for all of the extra desks. Mrs. Dreyfuss solved the problem by giving up her back table.

I was happy for her, until I realized what it meant for me. For all of us.

“They’re making a new class? Now?”

Anna Margaret nodded, motioning for me to be quiet. We slowed down so that we fell behind the rest of the group, and then she nodded again. More questions came tumbling out.

“But how will they pick who goes? And what about Mrs. Dreyfuss?”

I thought about everything I hadn't learned about her yet. I didn't even know what color pen she used to grade papers.

“You'll be fine. Your name wasn't on the list.”

Anna Margaret paused, staring straight ahead. I realized that the new teacher hadn't been the big reveal, after all. Worse, I recognized the gleam in her eye.

“Mine was. Guess I'm finally going to have my chance with Brooks, after all.”

CHAPTER 3: Paper Privileges & Passing Notes

By Monday, Anna Margaret was gone. She wasn't the only one—four kids from each class were moved to Mr. Ramsay's. Mrs. Dreyfuss took their names off the Class Birthdays bulletin board. I hated how lonely my name looked in June.

Mrs. Dreyfuss had a bulletin board for just about everything. There were women in history on the back wall, figurative language by the window, and positive affirmations to the left of the door. On her desk, she had a tiny framed board with tiny, cactus-shaped pushpins. Most of the photos were of her wife, her dogs, or her wife and her dogs. I liked looking at them when she asked for my help.

The first time, I had finished my book during silent reading. Mrs. Dreyfuss waved me over when she saw me re-reading the back cover.

“Could you put these in alphabetical order?” she whispered, holding up a stack of worksheets. She smiled when I nodded, which made me smile too.

“Thanks, January! You're a lifesaver!”

According to her figurative language board, that was a hyperbole, but I didn't care. Pretty soon, I was staying up late so I could finish my book during silent reading. I liked having something to do—and getting to see how everyone else had done. Neat-as-a-pin Nora

Loper had the messiest handwriting I'd ever seen. What-grade-did'ya-get Graham McLaughlin misspelled his own last name. And nobody knew but me and Mrs. Dreyfuss.

The first Monday without Anna Margaret, there were a few of her worksheets left in the stack. Mrs. Dreyfuss asked me to take them to her, and a few minutes later, I was outside of Mr. Ramsay's door. Brooks opened the door before I could knock.

“Mr. Ramsay! Someone's here!”

Brooks grabbed a bathroom pass and brushed past me into the hallway. I took a mental picture for Anna Margaret—blue shirt, floppy hair, neon orange tennis shoes—then remembered that they were in the same class, so she'd probably seen him already.

If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought that Mr. Ramsay had been there for years. There was an overstuffed couch under the window and a giant fern in the corner. He had movie posters on the wall, a fuzzy rug in front of the whiteboard, and a record player to the right of his desk. It spun lazily, playing some kind of jazz, which blended with chatter from around the room. I felt a pang of jealousy, then a wave of guilt. Mrs. Dreyfuss's bulletin boards were cool too, even if a little babyish.

Mr. Ramsay greeted me with a grin. I told him I had papers for Anna Margaret, and he pointed me toward

the cluster of beanbags. She was curled up in the leftmost cushion, clipboard and worksheet in hand. Her pencil bounced to the beat of the music. Another pang of jealousy. Another wave of guilt. Around and around and around.

When she noticed me, the whirlpool stopped. She jumped out of the beanbag, almost tackling me in a hug. Mr. Ramsay didn't bat an eye.

“You're here! Why? It's good to see you! But why?”

“Mrs. Dreyfuss still had some of your papers, so I had to br-,” I started, but Anna Margaret interrupted before I could finish.

“Isn't this *amazing?*,” she said, spreading her arms wide as if trying to hold it all.

“No, yeah, it is.”

“And you haven't even met Milk and Honey! They're our hamsters, they're the best. Mr. Ramsay said he'll let us take turns taking them home.”

She went on about the hamsters, Mr. Ramsay, finally having a chance with Brooks. I didn't have anything nice to say, so I didn't say anything at all. Eventually, her stream of good-news consciousness ran dry.

“Wow, it feels like it’s been a million years. How’s Mrs. Dreyfuss? How’re you?”

“She’s good,” I said, and I stopped myself there. I worried that if I went on—if I answered her second question—I wouldn’t be telling the truth.

When I got back to class, it looked grayer than I remembered. To make matters worse, Mrs. Dreyfuss was in the middle of a lesson, and I’d completely missed the first few slides. I pulled out a notebook and a pencil that needed sharpening. It wasn’t until I had scribbled the first bullet point that I realized I had nothing to fill it with.

“Here, use mine.”

I snapped towards the left, startled by the sound. Isla Boseman was leaning across the aisle, holding out her notes. Suddenly, the room was back in full color.

The last time I’d been in the same class as Isla, we were itty-bitty kindergartners who were too shy to speak. Our teacher, Mrs. Miller, had put us at the same table. When Anna Margaret was absent, we’d share Legos in silence.

Now, Isla was smiling a full-face smile—the kind that started in her eyes and brought out her dimples. Her pink and orange bracelets matched the beads in her

braids. For a second, I felt shyer than my kindergarten self. I tried to say thank you, but no sound came out.

When I remembered to move, I pulled the notes onto my desk. Unlike Nora Loper, Isla's handwriting was perfect. She wrote lowercase a's the fancy way, with little curls on top. The paper was dappled with highlighter and glitter pen. I felt as if her butterfly doodles were fluttering around in my stomach.

I copied the notes quickly, then passed them back across the aisle. When it was time to line up for lunch, I lingered by the door.

"Your handwriting is amazing," I said, following her into the hall, "Thanks for looking out!" I kicked myself for sounding lame—*It was amazing? Thanks for looking out?*—but Isla didn't seem to care. She beamed, which brought back the sparkly eyes and the dimples.

"Thank you! My dad says good notes are the first step towards good grades, so I guess I'm trying to make that true."

"Your grades must be perfect then," I said, laughing a little. I meant it as a compliment, but Isla looked at the floor. I scrambled to salvage the moment, filling the silence with whatever came to mind.

"I mean, my handwriting looks like a 2nd grader's, so I hope that's not true. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm supposed to be left-handed."

Isla giggled, so I kept talking. I babbled about all of the quick fixes I'd tried: pencil grips, tracing, switching to cursive every once in a while. I told her that once, Eden had gotten so fed up with the way I'd signed a birthday card, she'd erased my note and rewritten it for me. When she'd done it, I'd been so mad that we didn't talk for a week, but for some reason, talking to Isla, the whole thing felt funny. I didn't realize how loud we had gotten until Mrs. Dreyfuss cut us off.

“January. Isla.”

Mrs. Dreyfuss raised her eyebrows and made a shhh-ing sound. On any other day, it would have echoed in my ears, but for once, I hardly noticed. I was already smiling.