

Reading Trans Books for Teens Helped Me Come Out

by Fin Leary

Art from *Man o' War*.



When was the first time you saw your experience reflected in a book? For me, it was in 2010, when I was 17 years old and read *Parrotfish*, by Ellen Wittlinger. This was the first time I came across a trans boy in fiction. It was also the first year I said, “I think I’m transgender” to anyone outside of my own head. Although that book’s protagonist, Grady, and I don’t share identical experiences, it was liberating to think that I was not the only trans teenage boy out there, even if I wasn’t yet ready to come out to everyone.

At the time, trans representation in fiction for young people was still exceptionally rare. The first traditionally published young adult novel about a trans character written by an openly trans author, *Being Emily*, by Rachel Gold, came out in 2012, according to research published by author Ray Stoeve, in a 2020 essay in *Autostraddle*. Since then, the number of traditionally published trans authors has increased; meanwhile, book bans frequently targeted titles with trans characters. In the last several years, anti-trans legislation has also been on the rise: in 2023 alone, over 550 anti-trans bills have been introduced across the country, according to *translegislation.com*. In this often-hateful political climate, reading youth fiction by trans authors that centers trans characters has been a joyful, transformative experience and has served as a life raft for me during my public coming-out journey.

The day I finished reading Cory McCarthy’s *Man O’ War*, I was at the beach with friends. The story, about a Lebanese American trans swimmer, made me feel like I was finally being let up for air after years of being held underwater. The book begins with River jumping into a shark tank, which kick-starts their coming out. McCarthy writes, “That wasn’t the kind of wild hope I could let myself have . . . but now, the possibility left me a new kind of breathless.” This was the exact feeling I had when, after finishing the book, I waded into the ocean: hopeful that I could be as brave as the protagonist in my own coming out.

Other trans middle-grade and young adult books have left a similar footprint on my relationship to my own identity. Mason Deaver’s *I Wish You All the Best* was the first time I encountered

a nonbinary character in a book, and its depiction of the touching relationships between Ben and all the supportive people in their life was a necessary reminder that my loved ones would still love me unconditionally if I came out as trans. I loved that *Felix Ever After*, by Kacen Callender, featured a main character who is a Black demiboy and that, while Felix’s gender isn’t the entire focus of the plot, as readers we get to see his thought process around finding that label. While I eventually settled on *trans man* as being the most accurate term for me, both stories helped me explore my own gender and define for myself what it means to express myself outside of the gender binary.

While mainstream media tends to focus on trans characters who are straight, youth fiction has portrayed more queer trans characters. My first experience reading one such character was with *Cemetery Boys*, by Aiden Thomas, but Thomas’ fantasy *The Sunbearer Trials* was equally captivating. Both Yadriel and Teo, the novels’ respective protagonists, are nuanced queer trans characters, and in both of these fantasy settings, their transness is affirmed through the way that the magic systems operate. These moments left me grinning, thinking about how a trans teen boy today might read these stories and know that he can be himself. *The Sunbearer Trials* was the first book I’d read with an on-the-page depiction of a trans person giving himself a testosterone injection, and I think about the power of that scene each week when it’s time for mine.

The Borrow a Boyfriend Club, by Page Powars, is a queer trans YA romance that felt like it was written specifically as a love letter to fans of transgender anime, and it had my heart aching at the portrayal of embracing aspects of yourself that you might have previously felt you needed to cast aside in order to be viewed as a “real” boy. Anna-Marie McLemore’s *Self-Made Boys: A Great Gatsby Remix* reimagined Jay Gatsby and Nicolás Caraveo as a queer trans boy and a Mexican American queer trans boy. That book was my first experience in which both the protagonist and the love interest are trans—also known within the trans community as a T4T romance. These stories all made me

feel seen and affirmed as a queer trans man and made it easier for me to come out as trans to myself as well as to others when I already knew that I was queer.

Seeing disability intersect with trans identity has also been incredible as a reader. In *Ellen outside the Lines*, by A. J. Sass, autistic and Jewish Ellen begins to question her own identity after befriendng a nonbinary kid on a school trip to Barcelona. *The Spirit Bares Its Teeth*, by Andrew Joseph White, follows Silas, a main character who is both autistic and a trans boy (although, for historical accuracy, these words are not used on the page), in a historical-fantasy horror that explores vengeance and identity while also featuring an unexpected and beautiful T4T romance. In both of these titles, the intersection of autistic and trans pride was at the forefront, and as an autistic trans reader, I appreciated how these characters were allowed to accept their full selves in the narrative, even when other characters wanted them to change.

Reading can be a balm in difficult times, and as I came out as trans more publicly in 2023, I found myself returning to trans authors again and again. There was a four-month period in which I read almost exclusively trans stories by trans authors, and they all made me feel the way that a good book should—like I was at home.

Fin Leary (he/they) is a program manager at We Need Diverse Books, a reviewer at *Booklist*, and a faculty member at Emerson College, where he teaches in the Writing, Literature, and Publishing department. Fin lives with his wife, three literary cats, and a rainbow bookshelf outside of Boston, MA.

Bibliography

Being Emily. By Rachel Gold. 2012. Bella, \$17.95 (9781594935985). Gr. 9–12.

The Borrow a Boyfriend Club. By Page Powars. 2023. Delacorte, \$18.99 (9780593568583). Gr. 9–11.

Cemetery Boys. By Aiden Thomas. 2020. Feiwel and Friends/Swoon Reads, \$17.99 (9781250250469). Gr. 8–12.

Ellen outside the Lines. By A. J. Sass. 2022. Little, Brown, \$16.99 (9780759556270). Gr. 4–7.

Felix Ever After. By Kacen Callender. 2020. HarperCollins/Balzer+Bray, \$18.99 (9780062820259). Gr. 8–12.

I Wish You All the Best. By Mason Deaver. 2019. Scholastic/Push, \$17.99 (9781338306125). Gr. 9–12.

Man o' War. By Cory McCarthy. 2022. Dutton, \$18.99 (9780593353707). Gr. 9–12.

Parrotfish. By Ellen Wittlinger. 2007. Simon & Schuster, \$12.99 (9781481468107). Gr. 9–12.

Self-Made Boys: A Great Gatsby Remix. By Anna-Marie McLemore. 2022. Feiwel and Friends, \$18.99 (9781250774934). Gr. 9–12.

The Spirit Bares Its Teeth. By Andrew Joseph White. 2023. Peachtree Teen, \$19.99 (9781682636114). Gr. 10–12.

The Sunbearer Trials. By Aiden Thomas. 2022. Feiwel and Friends, \$18.99 (9781250822130). Gr. 8–12.

