

Transphobic Tropes and Young Adult Fiction: An Analysis of Brian Katcher's *Almost Perfect*

Barbara Pini, Wendy Keys and Damien W. Riggs

The growing number of representations of trans people in the sociocultural realm are not produced exclusively for adults, but are also made available for youth audiences (Sandercock; Norbury). One of the vehicles through which trans people have been incorporated into youth culture is via the Young Adult novel. The premise of this article is that the increased production of such texts demands scholarly attention. Despite recent growth, trans representation remains sparse across youth literature. As such, the genre can provide an educative role for trans youth, allowing them to see their experiences and concerns reflected back at them (Pini, Keys and Marshall). Further, such novels can contribute to a trans pedagogy that challenges dominant discourses of gender and sexuality by educating students, teachers, and parents about the lives of youth with diverse genders and sexualities (Bach). Alongside their positive potential, however, novels featuring trans youth may also be oppressive for trans young people, and used as a pedagogic tool to reify hegemonic categories of sexuality and gender. As Keegan has insightfully argued, the proliferation of trans representations is not indicative of a “move to transgender equality,” for such representations can be used to “enforce” normativity.

In this paper we build on Keegan's (2013) contention through a critical reading of a youth novel featuring a trans protagonist, that is, Brian Katcher's *Almost Perfect*. The text explores the relationship between a cisgender (i.e., non transgender) white male, Logan Witherspoon, an eighteen-year-old senior at a high school in the small town of Boyer, Missouri, and a new arrival to town, a female trans character, Sage Hendricks. As the novel opens we learn that Logan has broken up with Brenda, his girlfriend of three years, after she

cheated on him. An air of mystery surrounds Sage. She has been home schooled and her parents do not allow her to date. Despite her parents' stance, Sage goes on a few dates with Logan. After they kiss she tells him that she was assigned male at birth and previously lived as such. Logan reacts very negatively to this news, but later tells Sage he still wants to see her. Sage and Logan later attend a frat party at Missouri University while visiting Logan's sister Laura, and have sex. Upon his return to Boyer Laura rings Logan to tell him about Sage's gender history. Concerned about what others will think of him, Logan breaks up with Sage. The following week Logan receives a frantic telephone call from Sage's younger sister Tammi. He learns that Sage had gone on a date and been beaten up after disclosing her "secret." Logan visits Sage in the hospital where she tells him she is going to live life as a man and leave Boyer. Soon after, Logan heads to college.

Katcher's (*Almost Perfect*) text is a particularly important one to examine for two key reasons. The first is its status as a Stonewall Book Award Winner. Inaugurated in 1971, the award is sponsored by the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table. Like other prestigious children's book prizes, the Stonewall Book Award affords a text prominence, sales, and longevity (Kidd and Thomas). A second reason why Katcher's (*Almost Perfect*) book demands attention is that it continues to be recommended in the academic literature for its positive trans representation (see Rockefeller; Miller). Costello and Reigstad and Parsons discuss using the text with preservice teachers, while Hayn et al. suggest it as appropriate in secondary English classrooms. Even a recent analysis of award winning LGBTQI youth fiction by Clark and Blackburn, which highlights some of the book's shortcomings in terms of the portrayal of violence, asserts that the text is valuable in that it "disrupts homonormativity by including a transsexual character, Sage" (884). As we demonstrate in our argument below, this is a problematic assertion given that the mere presence of a trans character does not challenge homonormativity.

Reading and Analysing Trans Youth Fiction

We began our analysis with detailed, repeated readings of the text, looking at dominant themes, patterns, inconsistencies and omissions, particularly in light of our knowledge of the dominant cultural repertoires that have traditionally been brought to bear on trans representations. We undertook this task independently, and then collaboratively. As well as the text itself, we read media reviews, endorsements, and interviews with the author, publicity materials, and online comments from readers. In situating the book within a broader social and cultural context, we followed other studies of trans representations, which have demonstrated paratextual materials to be important data sources (Cavalcante).

One of the key paratextual features we examined as part of our analytic process was the acknowledgment page at the end of the novel. Here Katcher (*Almost Perfect* 359) explains that he created the character of Sage by talking to “real-life Sages who were willing to share their personal tales” with him. In making such a claim he affords the text authenticity as grounded in “real-life.” How the trans youth who spoke to Katcher felt about the appropriation of their stories for the book is not known. We found no commentary about the ethics of utilizing their narratives in media discussions with the author. Relatedly, we found no mention of the ethics of telling a trans story through the prism of a cisgender white male, whereby the trans voice and experiences are marginalized, and the cisgender perspective privileged. We did find a reference where Katcher (Interview) addressdc his own positionality as a heterosexual male writing a LGBT novel. He states, “By definition a novelist is someone who writes about things that they’ve never experienced—fiction is all about inventing characters. Otherwise, I could only write about phenomenally handsome librarians from Missouri.” Katcher’s (Interview) glib and dismissive response belies the vexed debates about trans representation, including representation by academics (e.g., Hale;

Prosser; Valentine). Our own approach was one marked by an acute awareness of these debates, and the need for a reflexive questioning of the partiality of our interpretations, in light of our subjectivities as cisgender people. This questioning occurred throughout the process of analyzing the book and the writing of this article, and continues in our acknowledgment that our conclusions are shaped by our social locations, and are necessarily partial.

Katcher's Gendered and Heterosexist World

In *Almost Perfect* heteronormative gender binaries are routinely normalized and reinforced (Katcher 44, 47, 82, 118, 175, 184, 198, 227). Women talk about fashion and hairstyles, but men have no interest or knowledge of these subjects. Young women drink wine coolers, while young men obsess about women's breasts. Similarly women show emotions and talk about their feelings, and men do not. Women are clean and tidy, whereas men fart and scratch themselves. Men constantly seek to have sex with women, and women deflect their attempts. Brothers threaten violence against other men simply for dating their sister, for it is their role to protect their sibling's virtue. In these two dichotomous worlds only a very narrow definition of appropriate masculine/feminine behaviour is permitted. This is exemplified when Logan denigrates Blake, the new partner of his previous girlfriend Brenda. The basis for Logan's disparagement is that Blake's name is not sufficiently masculine. Using his "best Homer Simpson mocking voice" he states: "Ooh, my name's Blake! Would you like to have some tea and go to the opera? . . . My name's Blake! I enjoy romantic movies and walks on the beach!" (134). Further regulating the gendered world created by Katcher is normative heterosexuality. Hegemonic discourses of heterosexuality and gender often overlap, as is the case when Logan explains to readers that it is normal for teenage boys to engage in homophobic banter. He states that this is simply a means to "demonstrate friendship and

camaraderie” (115). Normative discourses of gender and heterosexuality also intersect in the book via the message that the only “real” sex is vaginal intercourse. The night after Logan has sex with Sage he reflects that while “The night had been wonderful.” However, he comments, “there were certain things Sage couldn’t do,” and asks, “How long could I date a girl who didn’t have a vagina?” (254).

Discourses of gendered heterosexuality also emerge when Logan advises Sage that they could never simply be friends. He explains that there is no rationale for men and women to be friends. Men only really express friendship toward women “for one reason” as “from the age of about eleven, every straight guy cannot stop thinking about boobs” (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 175, 198). Women only ask men to be friends as a means of shutting down requests to have sex with them. Thus, according to Logan, “when a guy and a girl are friends, it means either the girl is ugly or the guy isn’t cool” (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 47).

Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) further establishes the gendered world of his imagination through Logan’s surveillance and judgments of women’s bodies against normative discourses of female heterosexuality. Katcher (15) describes Brenda as someone who “didn’t turn heads,” and Sage as not “a striking beauty” (17). These always gratuitous and sexist descriptions include passing mention of female classmate Tanya, who had been the “fat girl” in earlier years, but the mass “migrated to her chest,” so that now “she wasn’t exactly bikini material, but she did have a couple of good points” (5). Like other female members of the school-body who are named by Katcher (197), such as “Chubby, wobbly Cindy,” “Tall, gawky Vanessa,” and “Chest-less Carla,” the characterization of Tanya begins and ends with this description of her physicality.

Typically in the novel it is the bodies of young women that are casually and routinely subjected to negative evaluations, but in the character of Logan’s friend, Tim Tokugowa, Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) conveys a sense that embodied evaluations can also be made about

young men. Tim is overweight and subjected to frequent ridicule in the novel. His size is used as a source of humor, with Katcher promulgating the stereotype that overweight people are gluttons with disgusting habits. On different occasions he is described as having food stuck to his face, devouring a meal without utensils, farting loudly, and feasting on overly large servings. Importantly, while his size makes him a source of unpleasant humor, it does not prevent him from meeting a girlfriend. Tim's girlfriend opens up a whole new avenue for derision, not least because she works at the cinema snack bar. However, with a girlfriend Tim's body is reshaped. He begins attending to his dress and watching what he eats. In this respect Katcher mobilizes a further tired gender stereotype—that of the female as domesticator.

The Deceptive Trans Subject and Cisgender White Male Victim/Hero Trope

Representations of trans people as duplicitous have circulated widely across popular culture. In this portrayal trans people who simply live their gender are represented as engaging in “dishonesty and fraud” (Halberstam, *Telling* 62), “evil” deception (Bettcher 278), and as “masquerading” (Squires and Brouwer 296). In Katcher's (*Almost Perfect*) text this positioning of Sage is announced by the cover photograph that features a face cut off just above the lips. A mass of curly locks are shown falling behind the person's right ear. The eyes and nose are not visible so our full attention naturally moves to the parted lips, which are painted red, but the lipstick is noticeably smudged. This paratextual reference to lipstick as a symbol of a trans feminine identity is reinforced throughout the novel as Katcher (*Almost Perfect* 18, 20, 48, 63, 232) constantly describes Sage wearing, applying, or reapplying what is always bright lipstick. Lipstick is a common signifier in reductive media representations, as trans writer and activist Julia Serano explains. She draws on examples from popular culture, as well as her own experiences when being the subject of media reports, to argue for the

dominance of the lipstick trope in representations of trans women. She asserts that lipstick is used to convey that the trans women's claims to womanhood are deceptive and artificial.

What is most pernicious about the positioning of Sage as deceptive is that it simultaneously invokes a positive reading of Logan as victim and hero. This is a rhetorical manoeuvre that has often accompanied representations of trans people as deceptive (Squires and Brouwer; Bettcher). Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) establishes how he wants Logan to be seen through the creation of a back-story for him, which sets him up as a victim of past deception by his previous girlfriend, Brenda, whom he had dated for three years. Brenda breaks up with Logan, telling him she has met someone else and had sex with him. It is this decision to have sex with her new boyfriend, when she had not wanted to have sex with Logan, which seems so problematic for the central protagonist.

As is so often the case with *Almost Perfect*, this troubling perspective of women's obligations and responsibilities to men in relation to heterosex is not challenged. Brenda has no voice nor is she fully fleshed out as a character in her own right. Instead, Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) uses her as a plot device so that the revelation of Sage's "secret" is read in light of Logan's pain and vulnerability in the face of previous treachery. We are reminded over and over again of how devastated and distressed Logan is as a result of Brenda's actions. He sits waiting for Brenda's bus to appear each morning, holds his breath in hope when she passes his table in the cafeteria, and spends a sad evening going through mementos of their relationship he has saved.

The link the reader is asked to make between Brenda and Sage as similarly duplicitous female characters is cemented following revelation of Sage's "secret." At this point Brenda and her actions become a point of reference for judging Sage and her actions. In this comparison Sage is deemed to have committed the greater crime. Logan contends that "Sage made Brenda look like an amateur," asserts that "Sage's betrayal tops Brenda's," and

claims that Sage had “hurt me worse than Brenda had” (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 101–12, 124). Elsewhere he observes “after Brenda and Sage, my next date would probably turn out to be an axe murderer” (153). This aside, like so many in the text, is offensive on multiple levels—at once both misogynistic and transphobic.

While Sage’s “big secret” is her gender history, Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) introduces other scenes in the novel to demonstrate what are treated as her manipulative and deceptive capacities. Late in *Almost Perfect*, for example, when Logan tells Sage he is not going to the University of Missouri with her for the weekend she starts to cry. At her tears Logan immediately retracts his decision and agrees to accompany her. When Sage greets this news with a wide grin Logan states: “There was no trace of tears on her face, and I got the feeling I’d just been bamboozled. It scared me. What else could Sage get me to agree to?” (192).

The construction of Logan as a victim reaches its zenith in the aftermath of Sage’s disclosure that she is trans. The chapters that follow her revelation afford almost all attention to Logan’s affective and embodied reactions. We learn that Logan becomes physically sick as he runs from Sage, expressing emotions of horror and disgust. His prime concern is his fear that he is gay, and further, that this will be revealed to his friends and family. His immediate reaction after running from Sage is to scrub himself in the shower. He regrets he doesn’t have “some lye or some ammonia to burn Sage’s touch away” (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 103). This pathologizing of cisgender/trans intimacy as tainted and dirty is not disputed by other characters. Neither are Logan’s numerous abhorrent homophobic ruminations contested. These include his remark that kissing Sage “made me a fag,” his concern that merely flirting with Sage would “paint me pink,” his worry that his friends would discover he had “kissed an ass pirate,” leading to him being “branded” a homosexual (100, 103, 105, 107, 119).

Following the sharing of details about her gender history we are given a glimpse of Sage’s understandable fear when she asks Logan not to reveal she is “not a full woman”

(Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 105), but this shift of focus is only momentary. Astonishingly we are encouraged to be concerned about Logan's safety. We are encouraged to sympathize with his "horror," and the fact that he is "terrified" of leaving the house lest others should find out about Sage (111). The fleeting moments when the narrative lens turns on Sage, and/or where Logan starts to question his punitive, vicious, and egocentric reaction to "the secret," we are reminded of Sage's deliberate deception. As Logan maintains, "I was the one who'd been wronged. It was all her fault" (114). The author's ongoing legitimization of Logan's behavior extends to the point where he is actually positioned as laudable in that he had not punched Sage:

I had to remind myself of how she had betrayed and deceived me . . . when things had gotten rough and I'd found out Sage wasn't what I thought she was, I was so hateful to her. Jesus Christ, I'd almost punched her! I'd never imagined I was capable of that. It scared me. I guess no one could blame me for my initial reaction—all things considered, I'd kept my cool. (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 122)

It is not until page 128 that Sage is given an opportunity to share something of her own story. She tells Logan she feels guilty for not telling him she was trans, and that while she had wanted to share her history with him she was frightened he would punch her. The fact that he did not do this when she did disclose her gender history to him is then again commended, with Sage saying, "thanks for keeping your cool" (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 129). In such a transphobic book it is difficult to isolate an incident as the most contemptable, but this comes close. In this world moral value is afforded to the cisgender white male character simply because he did not commit physical violence against the trans character.

Echoing this positioning of Logan is a scene later in the novel when Sage experiences deep shame at not being able to enter a club because she does not want to use her

identification card, which labels her “male.” Logan reacts selfishly and continues to make a range of transphobic slurs, admitting that what she was made him “squirm,” and announcing:

Sage, I’m not going to lie to you and say I’m not freaked out by your . . . lifestyle.

Because I thought I could forget about it, but seeing you tonight, it’s all I can think about. I guess that means I’m a horrible person. Or perfectly normal, I don’t know.

(Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 147–48)

Just as homophobia is normalized in the novel so too is transphobia presented as a potentially expected human response. After being subjected to Logan’s incredible brutality and cruelty Sage again expresses her appreciation to him. She says she had “expected” him to behave toward her as he did, and volunteering that he had “reacted more calmly” than her parents (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 148). This is despite Logan’s use of the term “lifestyle” to refer to Sage’s gender history, a term that positions her gender as a matter of choice. Later when she is telling him a little about the suicidal thoughts that plagued her prior to transitioning, he interrupts, stating, “This is weird. I’m sorry but it is,” leading Sage to reassure and praise him for being “willing to listen” (166). The benchmark for acceptable treatment of trans people is thus set at an incredibly low level in the novel so that smears and insults, along with threats of violence, are naturalized and easily overlooked.

The Pathetic Trans Subject and Cisgender White Male Victim/Hero Trope

In delineating dominant cultural configurations of the trans subject, Serano has argued that the most emblematic is that of the “pathetic” trans. She explains that a core dimension of this articulation of trans people’s lives is that the trans woman (and, she says, it is usually a woman) is, in reality, a male, and so their womanhood inevitably falls short. This may be a source of humor or pity. In *Almost Perfect* Katcher’s focus on Sage’s femininity is not

typically used as comedic fodder, but as an indication of the ridiculousness and hopelessness of her claim to be female. It renders the tragic ending inevitable.

Much of the attention paid to Sage's femininity comes before the "revelation" of her gender history. There are "clues" Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) drops as to the supposed "truth" of her gender. Given prominence are Sage's deep voice, height, and extroverted personality. For example, in the space of just a few pages Logan comments that she is "amazingly tall" and "really tall," and reflects that "tall isn't necessarily bad" (for a girl), while his friend Jack remarks that Sage makes her younger sister look like a "dwarf" (17, 20, 21). On another occasion Logan observes that Sage is "too colourful" as well as "too outspoken, too wild" (27). We are told she confidently "stormed into the lab on the first day" and with a "loud laugh" immediately begins joking and engaging with Logan and his friends (16). She is described as flamboyant and exuberant. These are clearly, (and disturbingly), not traits Katcher associates with hegemonic definitions of femininity. Katcher's (*Almost Perfect*) depiction of Sage's failed femininity is also manifest in her dress. We are told her style of dress is markedly different from other women in Boyer, such as Brenda. On one occasion she wears a fake fur hat, leather boots and coat, and on another a stark black and white dress, enormous hoop earrings, pointy black boots, and a matching beret. According to Logan, Sage "dresses like she's been in a paint factory accident" (71). In this descriptor it is possible to read Sage as a person who does not know how to represent her femininity "properly" or "appropriately." Regardless, in later chapters of the book, after Sage's gender history has been shared, and she has suffered physical and emotional abuse, readers are invited to draw upon these early representations of her femininity to confirm the folly and impossibility of her quest to be female. It is this—rather than prescriptive gender norms—which is her tragedy.

The wretchedness we are asked to feel at Sage's femininity is manifest in Katcher's (*Almost Perfect*) fixating on her penis. Giving primacy to genitals is another clichéd and malicious feature of depictions of trans people in popular culture (Abbott). The message is that the trans person cannot escape their body. As Sloop explains, "the penis as a natural sign of masculinity and male-hood reinscribes the gender-as-sex ideology" (181). By focusing on the penis Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) thus patrols the restrictive gendered and sexed boundaries that frame his novel, while also amplifying the supposed ridiculousness of Sage's declaration that she is female. As Logan contemplates a relationship with Sage it is her genitalia that he finds most abject. He ruminates about her "big hairy balls," "an eight-inch cock," "a dick growing between her legs," and her "cock and balls" (100, 104, 211). That her penis defines her is evident as he observes: "Sage had kept her shorts on. But if she ever got careless one day and I actually saw it . . . that would be an image I could never forget. It would turn me off so much that I'd never be close to her again" (254). In responding to Sage's discussions about surgery Logan expresses the type of castration anxieties that mirror popular cultural texts about trans people (Phillips; Keegan).¹ For example, when Sage begins to tell Logan about her proposed surgery she barely has half a dozen words out before he shuts her down. In a scene that we are invited to read as humorous, he places his fingers in his ears and begins singing the "Star Spangled Banner." Further on in the text his testicles are given emphasis—they shrink up into his body—when Sage talks more determinedly about having surgery (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 209). Again, we are encouraged to laugh at this reaction, and share in the horror that is Sage's body, as well as the folly of her claim to womanhood.

Sage's pathetic categorization is underlined in the novel through the so-called "wrong-body discourse," which presents trans people as having a mismatched gender and corporeality (Barker-Plummer 711). It is a dominant mode of representing the trans subject in Young Adult Fiction (Putzi). Scholars have noted that this increasingly prevalent mode of

representing trans lives can be progressive in that it does not demonize trans people, and shows the potential for joy and fulfillment following transition, but argues it remains problematic, relying as it does on one specific view of what it means to be trans (Lovelock). The “wrong-body discourse” is further problematic for the ways in which it evokes the idea of being “trapped” in a body that will never conform to gender norms. An example of this is evident when Sage tells Logan why she decided to transition early and shows him a photograph. As he looks at the image he declares:

“It was a picture of a middle-aged guy in a blond wig and a dress. He was wearing makeup and sitting with his legs crossed. Obviously, he was trying to be pretty. There was no way. He was a man in a dress” (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 168).

Sage tells Logan that the person is Sylvia, who she has met online. This is the wrong trans body—a body that is shunned by Sage and by Logan, and indeed by Katcher in his misgendering of the woman in the picture. While Logan is far from accepting of Sage as a trans woman, he is still adamant that without surgery she is a nonperson. This is a critical caveat as, toward the end of the book, Sage decides not to continue her transition. The positive possibilities of her life as a woman are thus not opened up to her. Moreover, in the bifurcated gendered world created by Katcher (*Almost Perfect*), the trans body is only legible if surgery has been performed. Given that the author has shut down as inconceivable the idea that there are multiple ways of living a gendered life, Sage will remain, according to Logan, “stuck between two worlds” (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 177).

Sage’s life becomes most tragic toward the end of the novel. After breaking up with Logan she is viciously beaten after disclosing her gender history to a male after a date. She is bloodied and bruised in her bathroom when her sister calls Logan, who takes her to the hospital. At this point Logan has some insight into his actions and their impact on Sage, but

his self-questioning and guilt are assuaged by Sage's sister, and her father, who insist that he is not blameworthy.

Logan's absolution is furthered when Sage is admitted to a psychiatric institution after she threatens suicide following the attack. When Logan visits, the doctor tells him that Sage holds him in high esteem. Sage thanks him for coming, telling him, "You know, you always made me feel normal" (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 329). Logan has decided that he now wants to be with Sage and is ready to face the consequences of being viewed as "queer." However, Sage tells him she is moving interstate and that she has decided not to continue to transition: "I realised that I'm never going to be a woman. Even if I have the surgery, I'll be faking it. I'll always be a boy to my family, and I'll live the next sixty years wondering if my secret will get out" (33).

As Sage goes through this profoundly traumatic time she has little support. Her designation as "pathetic trans" is powerfully communicated by her almost complete isolation. In particular, Sage is completely isolated from any sense of supportive community. As Logan asserts, "Sage was doomed to walk a long, lonely road" (Katcher, *Almost Perfect* 45). There is one mention of Sage meeting an older trans woman online, but there is certainly no sense of belonging via connection to other trans youth in an online community. Indeed, while Logan has close male friends, and Sage has an easy rapport with them, she does not have any friends of her own. This is potentially rationalized by the fact that she is a new student at Boyer High School, and is a secondary character to Logan. However, it also suggests that Sage is almost completely alone in the world apart from Logan and her own family, and thereby foregrounds another recurring motif in representations of trans lives in popular culture. That is, the trans person as completely isolated (Keegan).

While Sage's family come to her bedside in hospital, we know from earlier in the novel that they have not been fully supportive of her transition. In fact, we discover that when

she first told her parents that she was trans, there was talk of institutionalizing her. Her father, who is introduced in chapter 16, continues to refer to Sage using masculine pronouns, and talks about her as a source of shame, disappointment and disgust. Her mother is also not openly supportive of her transition although she is concerned about her daughter running away or killing herself.

The novel ends as Logan begins his first day of college at the University of Missouri. He is pictured alone in the dorm room reading a letter Sage wrote to him after leaving Boyer. It is a significant moment in the novel as it is an opportunity for the author to give Sage the voice she has typically been denied throughout its pages. However, the two and a half pages of text are dedicated to absolving Logan and expressing gratitude and praise for his actions toward her. She writes, “Logan, I wonder if you realize how much you changed my life. Before I knew you, I was so unsure of myself. I thought I was a fraud, a fake woman, a transvestite. But then you came along. And you gave me hope. You treated me like a girl. A real girl. You made me believe I could do this” (Katcher *Almost Perfect* 352).

Sage reassures Logan that they were right to part as their relationship was ridden with the risk and the anxiety of her gender history being revealed to the world. As Logan finishes the letter he walks across the campus where he comes upon a young woman unloading boxes from her trunk. They introduce themselves and walk to the dining hall. As they do so Logan ponders whether this might be the beginning of a romantic relationship. Alongside this potential new partner he contemplates other female prospects. As the book concludes Logan’s heterosexuality is thus asserted. The trans body is completely erased as Sage ends her transition and leaves the state. Her trans presence is thus expunged by the novel’s conclusion, and a hegemony of cisgender heterosexuality recouped.

Conclusion

In this article we have contributed to the literature on trans representations in popular culture through an analysis of the award-winning Young Adult novel, *Almost Perfect*, by Brian Katcher. We began our discussion by focusing on the broader world created for Sage by Katcher, asserting that examining the imagined context through which a trans life is narrated is important. This is not a world that demonstrates the diverse ways in which gender and sexuality may be lived. Instead it is one where dominant discourses of gender and heterosexuality are regularly policed and regulated. Similarly it is one where sexist and patriarchal attitudes are routinely endorsed. Any atypical expressions of gender are sanctioned, often through recourse to homophobia. Indeed, any diversions from embodied norms, such as manifest in weight, are derided and eventually erased. In this world the authenticity of trans people's lives is highly questionable. The trans body that does not conform to normative expectations is a particular object of scrutiny, contention and disgust. Ultimately, it too is expunged by the novel's end as Sage decides to stop her transition.

Following our exploration of the narrow and oppressive parameters of the world into which Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) inserts his protagonist, we turned our attention to the more specific issue of the depiction of Sage. We argued that the author draws on two well-worn tropes to characterize his central female character, that is, deception and pathos. The first narrative lens, that of deception, involves presenting Sage as deceiving the guileless and good cisgender male character, Logan, into a relationship whereupon her "real" identity is revealed. The second narrative lens used to frame Sage is that of pathos. This representation of Sage is not given full force until the latter part of the book, but earlier plot devices signal the fragility and vulnerability of her life. It is a life of isolation, fear, conflict, and shame. Sage's precarious trans life becomes wholly pathetic as she is subjected to a violent attack and incarcerated in a psychiatric institution. The life she had imagined for herself is an impossible life.

In examining the framing devices invoked by Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) to portray Sage we gave equal attention to showing how they simultaneously positioned Logan, the cisgender white male character, as victim and hero. In the face of what is depicted as deceit he is a victim, so his transphobic behavior and words are recuperated as reasonable and explicable. In a manoeuvre breathtaking in its transphobia, Katcher even bestows virtue on him for not demonstrating more hatred and violence toward Sage. Meanwhile Sage is banished by the novel's end. Heterosexist gender norms are reinstated as the text concludes with Logan flirting with a young woman in the parking lot on his first day at university.

Lewis and Durand (38) contend that novels for youth contribute to the “murky waters” of complex and often contradictory discourses of youth sexuality. In light of a burgeoning market for LGBTQI youth fiction, we need to explore this discursive terrain as it manifests in novels featuring trans characters. Young Adult fiction with trans storylines has radical and liberatory potential to disrupt dominant discourses of gender and heterosexuality, but mere inclusion is not evidence of this potential being realized. In stark contrast, the inclusion of a trans character may be used to reify oppressive gender and heterosexist discourses of youth sexuality, and to further marginalize and stigmatize trans youth. Ultimately, this is our assessment of Katcher's *Almost Perfect*.

Fortunately, some more positive and affirming representations of trans young lives are now emerging in Young Adult fiction. The website www.therainbowowl.com, which documents the growing international body of literature and resources that focus on trans and gender diverse young people, their families, and those who support them, has a specific section on Young Adult fiction that includes useful reviews and commentaries. A further useful resource is the work of Sandercock (“Telling”; “Pain”), who offers insightful commentary on youth fiction that has more positively represented the lives of trans young such as *I Am J* (Beam), *Two Boys Kissing* (Levithan), and *Being Emily* (Gold). Sandercock

(“Telling”) also reports on more affirming depictions of gender nonconforming teens in *A + E 4 Ever* (Merely) and *Tomboy* (Prince). These texts demonstrate that change may be occurring in how trans youth are represented in Young Adult Fiction, but we must continue to be vigilant and critique the trans representations ensuring that visibility is not confused with the politics of subversion.

Notes

1. These are symbolically reinforced by Katcher (*Almost Perfect*) through the absent presence of Logan’s father, who abandoned the family when Logan was four. Logan ruminates about his father throughout the book, including on one occasion where he wonders pointedly if having his dad around would have stopped him taking up a relationship with Sage.
2. The novel also regularly features on media lists of recommended LGBTQI Young Adult fiction. See, for example:
www.quirkbooks.com/post/6-must-read-books-featuring-transgender-protagonists;
www.epicreads.com/blog/25-must-read-ya-books-featuring-gay-protagonists;
www.huffingtonpost.com/em-and-lo/the-21-best-transgender-b_b_9702762.html.
See also positive reviews of the book by readers on sites such as Good Reads, including reviews into 2017/2018 (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/5982474-almost-perfect>).
3. See Crisp on the politics of awards for LGBTQI children’s fiction.

Works Cited

Abbott, T. B. The Trans/Tomance Dilemma in *Transamerica* and Other Films. *The Journal of American Culture* 36.1 (2013): 32–41.

- Bach, J. Exploring Queer Pedagogies in the College-Level YA Literature Course. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37.6 (2016): 917–32. DOI: full/10.1080/01596306.2015.1071758.
- Barker-Plummer, B. “Fixing Gwen.” *Feminist Media Studies* 13.4 (2013): 710–24.
- Bartholomaeus, C., and Riggs, D. W. *Transgender People and Education*. London: Routledge. 2017.
- Beam, C. *I Am J*. London. Little Brown Books. 2011.
- Bettcher, T. M. Evil Deceivers and Make Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion. In *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. Ed. S. Stryker and A. Z. Aizura. London: Routledge. 2013, 278–90.
- Blackburn, M. V., Clark, C. T., and Martino, W. J. *Queer and Trans Perspectives on Teaching LGBT-themed Texts in Schools*. London. Routledge. 2017.
- Cavalcante, A. “Centering Transgender Identity via the Textual Periphery: *TransAmerica* and the ‘Double Work’ of Paratexts.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30.2 (2012): 85–101.
- Clark, C. T., and Blackburn, M. V. Scenes of Violence and Sex in Recent Award-Winning LGBT-Themed Young Adult Novels and the Ideologies They Offer Their Readers. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37.6 (2016): 867–86.
- Costello, A., and Reigstad, T. J. Approaching Young Adult Literature through Multiple Literacies. *English Journal*. 103.4 (2014): 83–89.
- Crisp, T. It’s Not the Book, It’s Not the Author, It’s the Award: The Lambda Literary Award and the Case for Strategic Essentialism. *Children’s Literature in Education*. 42 (2010): 91–104.
- Gold, R. *Being Emily*. Tallahassee: Bella Books. 2012.

Halberstam, J. J. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York UP. 2005.

---. "Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography."

Auto/Biography Studies 15.1 (2000): 62–81.

Hale, J. Suggested Rules for Non-transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans _____. *Sandy Stone*. n.d. <http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>. Accessed 20 November 2016.

Hayn, J. A., K. R. Clemmons, and H. A. Olvey. "Trans* Young Adult Literature for Secondary English Classrooms: Authors Speak Out." In *Teaching, Affirming, and Recognizing Trans and Gender Creative Youth. Queer Studies and Education*. Ed. S. J. Miller. Palgrave Macmillan, London. 2016

Katcher, B. *Almost Perfect*. New York: Delacorte Books. 2009.

---. Interview by Laura Lam. January 11, 2012.

<https://staticsplit.wordpress.com/2012/01/11/author-interview-brian-katcher-almost-perfect>. Accessed 20 November 2016.

Keegan, C. M. Moving Bbodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity.

Genders 57 (Spring, 2013). <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-324981029/moving-bodies-sympathetic-migrations-in-transgender>.

Kidd, K. B., and Thomas, J. T. "A Prize Losing Introduction." In *Prizing Children's Literature: The Cultural Politics of Children's Book Awards*. Ed. K. B. Kidd and J. T. Thomas. London: Routledge. 2017.

Levithan, D. *Two Boys Kissing*. New York. Knopf Books. 2013.

Lewis, M. A., and Durand, E. S. Sexuality as Risk and Resistance in Young Adult Literature. In *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature*. Ed. C. Hill. London: Routledge. 2013. 38–54.

- Lovelock, M. (2017) Call me Caitlyn: making and making over the 'authentic' transgender body in Anglo-American popular culture. *Journal of Gender Studies* 26.6 (2017): 675-687.
- Merey, I. *A + E 4ever*. New Jersey. Lethe P. 2011.
- Miller, M. C. Identifying Effective Trans Novels for Adolescent Readers. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 52.1 (2014): 83-86.
- Norbury, K. Re-Writing the Script: Representations of Transgender Creativity in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction and Television. *Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research* 37 (2014). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14811/clr.v37i0.180>.
- Parsons, L. T. Learning from Preservice Teachers' Responses to Trans-Themed Young Adult Literature: Improving Personal Practice in Teacher Education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. 37.6 (2016): 933-47.
- Phillips, J. *Transgender on Screen*. London: Palgrave. 2006.
- Pini, B., Keys, W., and Marshall, E. "Queering Rurality: Reading *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* Geographically." *Children's Geographies* 15.3 (2017): 362-73. DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2016.1252830.
- Prince, L. *Tomboy*. San Francisco. Zest Books. 2014.
- Prosser, J. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia UP. 1998.
- Putzi, J. "None of This 'Trapped-in-a-Man's Body' Bullshit": Transgender Girls and Wrong-Body Discourse in Young Adult fiction. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 36.2 (2017): 423-48.

- Rockefeller, E. I. Selection, Inclusion, Evaluation and Defense of Transgender-Inclusive Fiction for Young Adults: A Resource Guide. *Journal of LGBT Youth* 6.2–3 (2009): 288–309.
- Sandercock, T. “The Pain Came from Inside, Deep and Deadly”: Affect, Transition, and Imag(in)ing Trans Subjectivity in Cris Beam’s *I am J*. Australian Children’s Literature Association for Research. Deakin U, 30 June–2 July 2017.
- . “Telling Trans: Reading Transgender Representation in Texts for Young People. PhD Thesis. Deakin U. Melbourne. 2017.
- . Transing the Small Screen: Loving and Hating Transgender Youth in *Glee* and *Degrassi*. *Journal of Gender Studies* 24.4 (2015): 436–52.
- Serano, J. *Skirt Chasers: Why the Media Depicts the Trans Revolution in Lipstick and Heels*. Julia Serano. 2005. <https://www.juliaserano.com/outside.html#skirtchasers>.
- Sloop, J. M. Discipling the transgendered: Brandon Teena, public representation, and normativity *Western Journal of Communication* 64. 2 (2000): 165-189
- Squires, C., and Brouwer, D. In/Discernible Bodies: The Politics of Passing in Dominant and Marginal Media. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19.3 (2002): 283–310.
- Valentine, D. *Imagining Transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Durham: Duke UP. 2007.