

Lesbian Visibility: What does being visible mean to you?

Pictured: Anna Smith, Staff Pride Network Bookclub Coordinator

What does being visible as a lesbian mean to you?

In lieu of any formal events to celebrate Lesbian Visibility Week, one of our co-chairs and bi-rep, Katie, and our book group coordinator, Anna have had a virtual discussion (over email, fitting in between their busy work schedules!) about what it means to Anna to be visible as a lesbian.

Katie: The big question: what does being visible as a lesbian mean to you?

Anna: As a teenager coming to terms with my sexuality, I found the label 'lesbian' a useful one. It helped explain me, first and foremost to myself. Others had felt what I was feeling, had made sense of it and were out living their lives. My sexuality and gender presentation – things that marked me as different from my family and most of my friends at the time – also connected me into a wider community of people, existing in the past, present and future. Seeing lesbians in public life reinforced the idea that my identity was legitimate and not something to be ashamed of. As an adult I now try to be visible wherever appropriate, both to signal to lesbians who may be struggling to come out (either to themselves or others) that they're not alone, and to signal to society in general that we're a normal part of their world, too. I also hope that

this visibility will help me to use my privilege as a relatively well-represented identity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum to be an ally to and advocate for others whose identities are not yet recognised or celebrated.

Katie: Thank you so much for sharing that, I was wondering if you could expand on a few things for me? You refer to seeing lesbians in public life as important – was this generally or was it specific, perhaps well-known, figures that were helpful?

Anna: When I was a teenager it was generally people in the arts such as the author Sarah Waters and the musicians Tegan and Sara Quinn who were particularly helpful to me. These women were open about their sexuality, successful in their fields and were creating work that featured characters and narratives that resonated with me. Lesbian pop-culture websites such as AfterEllen (and later Autostraddle) also helped me feel part of a cultural conversation on lesbian and LGBTQ+ issues at a time when I had very few people in my offline life who I felt I could discuss these things with.

Katie: It just goes to show how important representation is. You also mentioned earlier that being a lesbian is a 'well represented identity' could you clarify this a little – do you mean, the average person may know that lesbians exist more so than other LGBT+ identities? Is this related to the fact there are now some quite famous lesbians in public life, politicians and celebrities etc...?

Anna: Yes, I think 'lesbian' is an identity that the

average non-LGBTQ+ person will have at least heard of and that many people will understand. For example, I would not expect to have to educate my colleagues, my boss or my GP on the basics of what being a lesbian means. I think this is partly down to the visibility of lesbians in public life, and in particular lesbians working on the creative side of the media in which we are depicted, for example lesbian film-makers, television writers etc. Other folks in the LGBTQ+ community don't have that luxury because there are always more barriers in place for trans, pansexual or non-binary people (for example) trying to get a platform from which to tell their stories than for gay or lesbian people. Sadly, prejudice from the gay and lesbian communities towards more marginalised sexual and gender identities often contributes to this problem.

Katie: Do you have anything else to add?

Anna: Representation of lesbians has come a long way in recent years due to the work of activists both in and outside the public eye. However, there's still some way to go, particularly in terms of increasing visibility for lesbians with other intersecting identities such as race, class and disability. I'm hopeful that in the future lesbians (and indeed any LGBTQ+ person), regardless of their situation or background, can see themselves accurately represented in society.

Lesbian Visibility: Shining a Light on Lesbian Authors



by Anna Smith, Coordinator of the Staff Pride Network Book Club

As part of Lesbian Visibility week I thought I would compile a list of books by lesbian authors, with lesbian characters, or both. This list is by no means exhaustive or representative of the objectively 'most notable' works around; it's simply a collection of authors whose work I get excited about. A note of caution – often an author's work may feature queer women but there is no record of the author's sexuality, which is fair enough because that's absolutely their business, but I'm hesitant to apply a label of 'lesbian' to these works given how often bisexual and otherwise queer-identified women are erased in LGBTQ spaces and dialogues. I've tried to stick to works where either there's some public record that the author self-identifies as a lesbian, and/or the character in the work

only has relationships with female-identified people. Please accept my apologies for (and let me know about) any errors! Furthermore, while I've attempted to make the list as diverse as possible I recognise that as a cis, white woman my reading (and therefore my recommendations) will probably have a cis- and white-centric bias, and I would encourage readers to seek out works by and featuring lesbians from the trans, BME, disabled and neurodiverse communities.

Lesbian authors whose work I am familiar with:

Becky Chambers

Chambers' science fiction series, which starts with *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*, imagines a far-future society in which humans have left Earth, met up with aliens, and are now trying to make their way in intergalactic society. Chambers' novels often feature multiple queer characters and put questions of friendship, identity and cross-cultural co-operation and understanding front and centre. Plus, y'know, spaceships! What more do you want!?

Emma Donoghue

Most famous for the contemporary novel *Room*, Donoghue has written many novels set in different time periods. I am a particular fan of *Life Mask*, a work of historical fiction which follows the life of sculptor Anne Damer in the Georgian period. It focuses on Damer's life burgeoning friendship with – and feelings for – a well-known actress of the time. Donoghue has also written lesbian characters in her short story collections *Astray* and *Touchy Subjects*.

Jackie Kay

Jackie Kay is a Scottish poet, playwright and novelist who I

was first introduced to when I read her memoir *Red Dust Road*, which interweaves reflections on her experiences of being adopted by a white family with the story of how she sought and met with her biological parents as an adult. *Red Dust Road* is a powerful exploration of identity and the concept of belonging.

Carmen Maria Machado

I read Carmen Maria Machado's short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties* on the recommendation of a friend and was absolutely blown away. Often featuring lesbian or queer women, the stories have a way of drilling right down to the bones (sometimes literally, given the often horror-inflected nature of the narratives) of their chosen themes. Despite all being set in worlds which are recognisably present or near-future, there's a broad spectrum here in terms of the degree to which the fantastical is allowed to manifest, and Machado wields the tools of magical realism with precision and wit.

Tamsyn Muir

I first heard about Muir at Worldcon last year, and have gleefully devoured her short stories *Union* and *The Deepwater Bride*, which are wonderfully creepy works of science fiction featuring lesbian characters. Her debut novel *Gideon the Ninth* has been described by the author as "just a collection of swordfights and people leaning in doorways" but by many other people as a thrilling adventure featuring lesbian necromancers in space. IN SPACE! I am, alas, waiting for it to come out in paperback so haven't yet had the pleasure of reading it.

Sarah Waters

Queen of lesbian historical fiction, has written several novels with lesbian protagonists. I'd personally recommend *Fingersmith* as a starting point, a gothic romance set in Victorian England, in which a thief plots to con a reclusive heiress out of her inheritance by posing as a ladies' maid. Waters' other works include *Tipping the Velvet*, *Night Watch* and *The Paying Guests*.

Jeanette Winterson

I think most people probably know who Jeanette Winterson is, right? She's best known for *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, a novel based on her own childhood and adolescence coming to terms with her sexuality as an adopted child of very religious parents. She's incredibly prolific and everyone who reads her work probably has their own favourites, but I love *The Passion*, a fantastical story following two protagonists (one a queer woman) across France and Italy during the Napoleonic wars.

Interesting-sounding books with lesbian authors or characters which I haven't read:

The Labyrinth's Archivist by Day Al-Mohamed

A Two-Spirit Journey (non-fiction) by Ma-Nee Chacaby

The Confessions of Frannie Langton by Sara Collins

A Safe Girl to Love (short story collection) by Casey Plett

The Seep by Chana Porter

Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me (graphic novel) by Mariko Tamaki & Rosemary Valero-O'Connell

Shout out to the Lesbrary and Tor Publishing's Queering SF series are other good sources for recommendations.

Staff Pride Network

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