

Boy Beats up Boy

Homophobia and gender performativity in David Levithan's Boy Meets Boy and Jonathan Tropper's The Book of Joe



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Abstract

The essay explored two young adult novels with LGBT+ content. This was done through two research questions. The first research question explored how the male homosexual identities were constructed by examining representations of gender binaries and homophobia. Secondly, the essay examined in what ways the novels might be used to inform Swedish students about the issues that face the LGBT+ community. This was done since the Swedish National Agency for Education emphasizes, in the curriculum, that all tendencies to discrimination should actively be combated. The material consisted of *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan and *The Book of Joe* by Jonathan Tropper. One novel was selected for following general trends within LGBT+ content novels, and the other was selected for containing an LGBT+ inclusive community. The material was analyzed through a qualitative content analysis using a deductively created coding scheme based on previous research and Queer theory. The samples that were used to support the analysis were selected because those were the parts where homophobia intersected with masculinity and/or femininity. The analysis revealed that femininely coded homosexual males were subjected to violent homophobia in both novels. Another result was that straight masculine male characters are presented as problematic in both novels. A limitation with the study was that the analysis was confined to the two novels. The study suggests that due to this limitation, further research might want to explore how these novels could be used in practice and whether the problematic elements that were raised in the analysis are of a concern or not for such purposes.

Keywords: Homophobia, young adult fiction, gender performativity, masculinity and femininity, LGBT+

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1. Introduction

Homophobia and homophobic violence are very real and current issues. In 2016, at least 49 people lost their lives and more than 50 were injured in what was then the deadliest mass shooting in US history (Ellis, Fantz, Karimi, & McLaughlin, 2016, June 12). The shooter purposefully targeted Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. This sort of violence against homosexuals is not limited to a specific context; it is global. For example, one year after the Pulse massacre, there are sources that claim that Chechen authorities are arresting, torturing, and killing gay men in the northern Caucasus region (Kramer, 2017, April 1; Rainsford, 2017, October 17).

Although it is arguably hard to pin-point where this violent attitude towards LGBT+ individuals comes from, one might want to look towards ways of changing it. One way to do this could be through the educational system since the children of today are the citizens of tomorrow. However, here in Sweden, a report by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2009) and an investigation by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2010) suggests that more needs to be done. The report found that the participants, who were students from the different stages of the Swedish education system, frequently used the word ‘faggot’ to harass fellow male students who acted femininely or had a feminine look. Moreover, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2010) found that various forms of harassment were common occurrences in their investigation of fifty Swedish schools. The investigation concluded that the inspected schools often did not foster democratic values as an integral part of regular subject teaching. These results are in contrast with the steering documents which mandate that the fundamental democratic values of the Swedish society are to be fostered in the Swedish school system, and that “[a]ll tendencies to discrimination or degrading treatment should be actively combated” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, p. 4).

1.1 Sensitizing Through Reading

Although the aforementioned conclusions from the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate paint a bleak picture of the everyday reality of Swedish homosexual students, students in Swedish compulsory and upper secondary school have expressed a desire to discuss issues concerning sexual orientation (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009). These discussions could combat degrading treatment and discrimination that target homosexual individuals and could be instigated through reading and discussing novels with LGBT+ content. Educators will not find it difficult to get hold of young adult fiction with homosexual characters (see e.g., Cart & Jenkins, 2006, pp. 201-208). Ideally, one should bring in novels that pique students' interests and young adult fiction might be a good choice since they are purposefully made and marketed with adolescent readers in mind (Jenkins, 1998). The focus of this essay will, therefore, be on how young adult novels and reading can be used to integrate English with the teaching of the equal value of LGBT+ individuals, since

consciously reading from different perspectives can change your ideas about the text and even about your place in the world. In this way, the subject of English can bring to light and even challenge ideas we take for granted. (Eaglestone, 2000, p. 27)

This belief of sensitizing people through reading is shared by Otto (1995), who explained that their classroom discussion of homosexuality, in a graduate course on issues in reading education, was subdued compared to other minority issues. Otto reasoned that this could have been because the students lacked books which represent homosexuality, “[b]ooks that help them see some faces” (Otto, 1995, p. 494). McLean and Gibson (1999) explored Otto's theory in practice. They followed a high school teacher and their use of the novel *The Color Purple* to explore LGBT+ issues. The teacher successfully engaged the students to think about and reflect on LGBT+ issues by not forcing the topic and by having the students write reflective journals on their reading. Furthermore, the researchers argued that the use of literature gave the students

a safe context to discuss these issues. Finally, they emphasize that one needs to make sure that “students recognize the importance from the first day of class of being alert to issues of justice and equity for all people” (McLean & Gibson, 1999, p. 55).

Other researchers, such as Athanases (1996) and Helmer (2015), have also explored the use of LGBT+ texts within classroom contexts. Athanases followed the teacher Reiko and their tenth graders in a unit of ethnic short stories and essays. The study specifically examined the lesson dealing with the essay “Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual” by Brian McNaught, where Brian argues against prejudices that affect homosexuals. The students in Reiko’s class found that the essay by Brian McNaught was good at dispelling myths about homosexuals and homosexual stereotypes. Through examination of the students’ reflections and discussions of the text, the researcher concluded that the students had developed more empathy and understanding for homosexual men. One student claimed that the unit was ‘an eye-opener’ and that the lesson had changed their perception of homosexuals for the better (Athanases, 1996, p. 249).

Likewise, Helmer (2015) followed the teacher Sara and their elective course on gay and lesbian literature. Helmer found that the open class environment made the students more comfortable discussing LGBT+ issues. Additionally, the students became more knowledgeable and developed a critical consciousness on LGBT+ issues, and became more accepting of LGBT+ individuals. One student even expressed how they used to bully homosexuals but did not want to do so anymore. Although none of the previously mentioned studies can be generalized, they point to the fact that sensitizing one’s students through reading is possible and is a tool to combat homophobia.

1.2 Aim and Purpose

As noted, the previous literature indicates that one can bring in LGBT+ literature to discuss and combat homophobia. This does not, however, mean that all LGBT+ texts are good to bring into the classroom, because as Fuoss (1994) claims, “the question ‘Is this novel good?’ makes little sense apart from the questions that contextualize this evaluative endeavor – namely, good for whom, and good at doing what?” (p. 160). As educators, we *have to* examine these novels and their content to be able to say what parts are good at combating homophobia and which parts might be problematic at doing so. For example, Crisp (2009) suggests that homophobia is used to create a sense of realism within young adult novels, and Wickens (2011) suggests that “homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, provide the root of the internal and external conflict for the characters in the majority of LGBTQ-themed books” (p. 153). These elements work against an educational policy which is supposed to impart the equal value of all individuals. Therefore, the aim of this study is to employ queer theory on two young adult novels to analyze the values within them, and whether one could use these novels to change attitudes towards LGBT+ individuals. This aim is by its very nature somewhat activist since it aims at providing teachers with an understanding of the values in the texts, and why educators should be aware of the values they might impart on their students by selecting these texts.

With the aim in mind, I am going to explore the novels *The Book of Joe* by Jonathan Tropper and *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan. *The Book of Joe* follows the narrator Joe Goffman, who angered his hometown when he wrote a best-selling novel about his adolescence. The novel revolves around Joe’s friends Sammy and Wayne and their relationship. The narrative is divided into two parallel parts, one retelling Joe’s adolescence, the other focusing on Joe’s present. I selected this novel for following the general trends noted in the studies done by Jenkins (1998) and Cart and Jenkins (2006), namely that it features a society which is deeply homophobic where homosexual characters live in isolation from the LGBT+ community, and

the homosexual characters are not the narrators of their own stories. *Boy Meets Boy*, on the other hand, was selected for presenting a primarily LGBT+ friendly community where homophobia is unfashionable, and where the narrator is homosexual. The following research questions have been designed to explore the aim:

1. How does homophobia and masculinity/femininity inform and construct the male homosexual identities in the novels?
2. In what way can the novels be used to inform students of the issues and problems that face the LGBT+ community?

While both novels deal with homophobia and masculinity/femininity differently, the analysis indicates that the way that the novels deal with homophobia and the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity is in some regards problematic for an educational context.

2. Queer theory

2.1 Heteronormativity, Performativity, Homophobia, and so on

What is queer theory then? Tyson (2015) argues that queer theory is a theoretical lens in which sexuality is seen as fluid, that is to say, it is hard to define one's sexuality in static terms such as hetero-, homo- and bisexual. "[H]eterosexuality is not a norm against which homosexuality can be defined" because that would not consider all the different factors which make up one's sexuality (Tyson, 2015, p. 321). Queer theory rests however on the assumption that our society *is* a heteronormative one where belonging to the heterosexual category *is* the norm. To be heterosexual is to be attracted to one's opposite gender, and according to Judith Butler (1999) in *Gender Trouble*, this "heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical opposition between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female'" (p. 23). In other words, because of heteronormativity, humans are policed to act a certain way due to their gender (Crisp, 2009; Tyson, 2015; Wickens, 2011).

This process of policing is intertwined with the theory of gender performativity. Gender performativity is how we adhere to the policing of gender. Butler (1999) suggests that the way gender as an identity is understood is through "stylized repetition of acts" (p. 179). It is through these repetitive stylized acts that certain behaviors are recognized as belonging to a gender (Chinn, 1997; Town, 2017). For example, a self-identified man in a western context wearing a skirt in public might draw a reaction from his surrounding for not adhering to the normative notion of what it means to be a man. However, norms are culturally contingent. In a South American context, for example, the one who penetrates another man in anal intercourse is not necessarily a homosexual, whereas in a North American and European context the same act would have been (Tyson, 2015).

Since norms are culturally contingent, it is hard to pin-point a definite set of attributes that are either masculine or feminine. Murray R. Thomas (2001) suggests that the traditional female attributes are “gentleness, modesty, humility, sacrifice, supportiveness, empathy, compassion, tenderness, nurturance, intuitiveness, sensitivity, unselfishness”, whereas the traditional male attributes are “courage, strong will, ambition, independence, assertiveness, initiative, rationality and emotional control” (p. 248). These ideals of what it means to belong to a certain gender and to act it out are reflected in young adult LBGT+ fiction as well. Crisp (2008, 2009) notes that homosexual male characters in young adult novels are portrayed as stereotypes with either stereotypically feminine or masculine traits. For example, in Alex Sanchez’ *Rainbow Boys* trilogy, Crisp (2008) observes that although all three of the main characters are gay males, one is portrayed as a stereotypical masculine jock being independent, aggressive and unemotional, whereas their partner is stereotypically portrayed as feminine in the sense of being emotional, sensitive and sacrificing themselves for their partner’s wellbeing. In this study, masculinity and femininity will be examined relationally (what masculinity is, femininity is not and vice versa).

Heteronormativity inevitably, as of yet, comes with homophobia. Homophobia is a form of harassment which affects LBGT+ people. Homophobia is generally understood as an irrational fear of same-sex love, but can also be, as Tyson (2015) argues for, the “institutionalized discrimination (discrimination that is built into a culture’s laws and customs) against LGBTQ people” (p. 305). Additionally, homophobia is a way to punish individuals for not adhering to the heteronormative society, as is evident in the aforementioned report where Swedish students used the word ‘faggot’ to verbally assault effeminate males (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009). At its most violent of forms, homophobia kills people. Several studies (Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Crisp, 2008, 2009; Fuoss, 1994; Jenkins, 1998; Wickens, 2011) have shown that homophobia is a common occurrence in young adult fiction with gay

characters. Homophobia can, as Cart and Jenkins (2006) note in their study of around 200 young adult novels with LGBT+ content from 1969-2004, take the form of physical violence against homosexuals. Homophobia can also come in the form of portraying homosexuals as a sinful perversion (Wickens, 2011). Homophobia as an issue that homosexuals face in their lives could be said to be reflected in these novels. In this study, homophobia will be defined as acts which indirectly or directly negatively affect homosexuals because of their homosexuality. Acts which indirectly negatively affect homosexual men are for example assumptions or prejudices against homosexual men. Indirect homophobia can also take place in contexts where no homosexual man is present, but the discussion between two characters, for example, uses homophobic slurs. Acts which directly negatively affect homosexual men are, for example, physical violence or verbal harassment directed at homosexual men.

3. Method

3.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

The method that was applied to the material was a qualitative content analysis with a deductive coding scheme based on the critical lens of queer theory. Qualitative content analysis is a process where the material is categorized in “categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 2). This was done through the development of a coding scheme. According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), a coding scheme can be based on the data, previous research, and theory. Since qualitative analyses are interpretive, the method will employ inductive reasoning to draw its conclusions (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The coding scheme was developed deductively, since it was based on theory and previous research (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). I also performed a formative reliability check, which is to check coded examples with the deductively generated categories (Drisko & Maschi, 2015), and found the categories to be operationalizable. I do think that the direct/indirect homophobia division could have been stricter, however, due to the scope of the study, the coding consistency was not checked with a peer. Therefore, the level of inter-coder agreement is unknown, and the coding rules were not revised during the process, even though doing so would improve the reliability of the study (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

I then applied a close-reading of the novels and separated the categories homophobia and masculinity/femininity with different colors. One color was given for homophobia and another for masculinity/femininity. I specifically looked at the contexts rather than specific lexical items related to the categories. Masculinity/femininity were defined as each other’s opposites and coded into the subcategories masculinity and femininity based on how well the context fit into the traditional attributes of masculinity/femininity that were elaborated on in the theory section. Homophobia was defined as contexts that either indirectly (assumptions about homosexual

men, societal pressure, norms, etc.) or directly (violence, harassment, etc.) negatively affect homosexual characters and were divided into the subcategories indirect homophobia and direct homophobia. To not mix up my subcategories, each subcategory was given a separate color which I marked beside the main category marking. Samples were then selected from the coded material for the analysis. The analysis that was performed was a close reading of the coded material. The close reading involved interpreting the passages for their explicit and implicit meanings. The samples that were selected were primarily the ones where the categories intersected because I personally found that those parts were of particular interest. What is of particular interest for someone is of course highly subjective, but coding is “primarily an interpretive act” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 4), and, therefore, one cannot escape some degree of subjectivity.

3.2 Limitations and Strengths

Research can be either qualitative or quantitative (Nunan, 1992), and coding schemes can be deductively or inductively generated (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The choice to only perform a qualitative analysis can be seen as both a limitation and a strength of the study. Quantitative research has the benefit of producing reliable, replicative, and generalizable data (Nunan, 1992). However, the reason I opted for a qualitative method instead of a quantitative method was that I wanted to engage with the details within my material; I wanted to explore the contexts in which the observed categories appear (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Whereas a quantitative approach would have been able to produce more evidence for the prevalence of homophobia within the young adult novel genre, and the stereotypes concerning male homosexuals, it would not have been able to engage with the details where homophobia and male homosexual stereotypes appear. Another limitation, due to the scope of the study, was that the coding scheme was developed entirely deductively, which means that interesting patterns that might have emerged from a combined deductive and inductive reading

of the texts were not explored. For example, both novels are hopeful of the future being a better place for LGBT+ individuals, and the novels have a huge contrast in the LGBT+ community that they present. *The Book of Joe* only has two male homosexuals and nothing else, whereas *Boy Meets Boy* features a plethora of non-normative identities. One could perhaps use these elements, combined with my results, to explore different ways of using and discussing the novels within an educational context. For example, one research question could examine how teachers use the novels to combat homophobia. Another research question could be to explore what parts of the novels are highlighted in this endeavor to combat homophobia.

4. Analysis

This analysis is divided into two parts, the first part analyzes how homophobic violence is primarily acted upon feminine homosexuals. The second part of the analysis will explore the root of the homophobia present within the novels.

4.1 Feminine Gays Get Bashed

In both novels, the homosexuals that are portrayed with stereotypically feminine attributes are the ones that suffer from violent homophobia. This section concludes with a discussion on the problematic nature of these portrayals for an educational context.

4.1.1 Even in alternatives there is normativity.

Boy Meets Boy by David Levithan has in many ways been explored as an alternative to the normative portrayals found in many young adult LGBT+ novels. Firstly, the novel places the gay character as the narrator of their own story. Secondly, although homophobia is present in *Boy Meets Boy*, it is not the central issue pushing the plot forward (Crisp, 2009); homophobia is challenged and condemned (Crisp, 2009; Wickens, 2011). Finally, heteronormative assumptions are questioned. Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth (2015) argue that this questioning of heteronormativity is present in examples such as the openly young and trans woman Infinite Darlene and through the narrator Paul's ex-boyfriend Kyle, who does not want to label himself as belonging to a sexuality. In short, *Boy Meets Boy* can be read as a critique of a heteronormative society and could, therefore, be used in the classroom to show what an alternative to our contemporary society might look like.

Although *Boy Meets Boy* challenges heteronormativity in many ways and features quite complex characters, the narrator Paul is portrayed with stereotypically feminine attributes. Paul's role in the novel is to primarily sacrifice himself for others. In the following extract, we

get to explore Paul's reaction to being stopped several times on his way to meet up with his new love interest Noah.

Reluctantly I turn around and see Lyssa Ling about to pull my sleeve. I already know what she wants. Lyssa Ling doesn't ever talk to me unless she wants me to be on a committee ... At first I am distracted by theme ideas. Then I remember the reason for my after-school existence and continue heading to locker 264 ... until I am stopped by my English teacher ... I can't exactly blow her off, nor can I blow off Infinite Darlene when she asks me how her double role at the Homecoming Pride Rally went. The minutes are ticking away. (Levithan, 2013, pp. 29-30)

Instead of excusing himself, Paul insists on staying behind, sacrificing his own wishes and desires to help others. Later in the novel, Paul's friend Joni asks him to join her and her new boyfriend Chuck for lunch, to which Paul reasons: "[b]ecause she's my best friend. I say yes." (Levithan, 2013, p. 54). This can be read as a friend just doing what is expected of them in a friendship, but it could also be read as a sacrifice since Paul has no other reason to go except for Joni being his best friend. The feminine-coded reading is more apparent when Ted, Joni's ex and Paul's friend, angrily calls Paul a traitor for hanging out with Joni and her new boyfriend.

"You're taking sides ... I didn't think you'd be supporting her stupid decision, Gay Boy. I thought you had some sense."

I can't tell him I agree, because then word will get back to Joni and she'll know how I really feel. So I stand there and take his wave of anger. (Levithan, 2013, p. 59)

Paul agrees with Ted, but for the sake of his friendship with Joni, he takes Ted's fury. He is being sensitive to the situation at hand.

Paul is also portrayed as modest and humble. Paul visits Noah's room when they get together and is in awe of Noah's whimsical room, a room where a "wall is covered in Matchbox cars glued in different directions" with window shades "made from old bubblegum wrappers" (Levithan, 2013, p. 46). When it is Noah's time to come over to his place, Paul is worried that his room is not "whimsical enough" (Levithan, 2013, p. 61). Paul's humble nature is

exemplified by his reluctance to accept compliments. For example, when Kyle, Paul's ex, compliments him on his planning, Paul responds "It was your idea," (Levithan, 2013, p. 127). Paul's humble attribute is also present when he reflects on how he is not like his mother.

Because my mom drills teeth for a living, she is very, very precise. ... My lines all curve. I tend to connect the wrong dots. (Joni tells me this isn't true ... But let me tell you – I could never make two separate pancakes that fit together ... (Levithan, 2013, p. 64)

Although I am arguing that Paul is primarily femininely coded, the novel does not assert that being like Paul is compulsory for homosexual men, nor is his love interest overtly masculine or feminine, which challenges heteronormativity and the norm that there is a 'man' and 'woman' in every relationship. The problematic nature of his femininity comes from him being the only one who is the target of homophobic violence.

Boy Meets Boy only has two incidents where Paul is subjected to direct homophobia and they are both condemned and challenged by the context. For example, when Paul is tackled by two wrestlers, who insult him with homophobic slurs, he is saved by his "friends from the fencing team" who "disarmed the lugheads" (Levithan, 2013, p. 13). Because Paul is defended, and direct homophobia is largely absent from the novel, *Boy Meets Boy* acts as a critique to a central element Cart and Jenkins (2006) and Fuoss (1994) note in their studies of LGBT+ content novels. This central element is the inclusion of homosexual characters suffering from graphic violent homophobia. However, Paul being feminine and targeted by two wrestlers, who must have identified him as gay or effeminate due to the homophobic slurs that were directed at him, suggests that being either an openly gay and/or feminine man will get you attacked, regardless of what society you live in. Thus, I agree with Crisp's (2009) reading of this scene as *Boy Meets Boy* signaling that non-normative sexual identities have something to fear, "even in the best of possible worlds" (p. 343). The novel does critique violent homophobic elements in LGBT+ lives by making them less apparent, but it does not exclude violent treatment of

homosexuals. To put it short, the novel presents an LGBT+ friendly community where homosexuals still get beat up and harassed.

4.1.2 The man and woman in a homosexual relationship.

Just as Crisp (2008) observed that the homosexual relationship in the *Rainbow Boys* trilogy, which are LGBT+ young adult novels written by Alex Sánchez where one follows three homosexual men in their adolescence, mirrors a heterosexual one, so too does the relationship between Sammy and Wayne in *The Book of Joe*. Sammy in *The Book of Joe* is cast as stereotypically feminine and suffers frequently from homophobic violence. Interestingly, Wayne, Sammy's love interest, is cast as masculine in the parts that retell their relationship but is cast as somewhat in-between feminine and masculine when we follow Joe in the present. Sammy is cast in contrast to his love interest Wayne. Whereas Wayne takes the initiative to jump straight into a pond, Sammy, due to his modesty, refuses to do so. Only when Sammy and Joe suspect that Wayne might have drowned do they swim out to look for him. Likewise, Sammy is portrayed as unselfish and sensitive. When Sammy and Wayne are outed as homosexual, Wayne panics and flees from Joe and Sammy. In the following passage Sammy sacrifices his own well-being for Wayne's.

Sammy's eyes filled with tears. "You'd better go after him," he said to me. "This is going to kill him."

"What about you?" I said.

Sammy turned to me, the tears running unchecked down his cheeks, and gave me the most pathetic look I'd ever seen. "Everyone knew I was a faggot anyway," he said softly (Tropper, 2010, p. 154).

Judith Butler's (1999) claim that heterosexualization of desire creates what we perceive as attributes belonging to male and female bodies is supported by the novel. This is exemplified when Wayne, in the present, "arches his eyebrow cynically in ... a *particularly gay* manner: stately, self-deprecating and slightly *feminine*" (emphasis mine, Tropper, 2010, p. 85). This

'particularly gay' way of being is avoided by masculine characters, suggesting that to be gay is to be feminine, which supports Butler's (1999) argument that non-normative identities are only thinkable in "relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence" (p. 23). For example, in the following passage, adolescent Wayne tries to assert his masculinity in front of Joe.

"He is who he is," I said. "Just because you defend a guy, that doesn't make you—"

"Doesn't make me what?" Wayne said, daring me.

"Nothing," I said.

"You think I'm a homo Joe?" he said, glowering at me.

"You think I'm gay?"

I considered the question carefully. "I don't know what to think."

"Well, I'm not," he said hotly. (Tropper, 2010, p. 97)

I argue for this reading of the text since it is in the context of Sammy being assaulted by his bullies. Wayne reasons that Sammy is harassed because he acts "like such a ... fag" (ellipsis in original, Tropper, 2010, p. 97). If heterosexuality is constructed through the binary opposition of masculine males and feminine females, and 'being gay' is observed as feminine, then any indication of gay attraction might be seen as a threat to heterosexuality. For example, when Sammy brings someone's sexuality into question after being interrupted "mid-piss" by his bullies, he "got a punch in the face and his head dunked in the toilet for his trouble" (Tropper, 2010, p. 96). Likewise, when Joe ridicules one of the bullies by insinuating that they too are homosexual and might enjoy anal sex, they retaliate by punching him in the stomach (Tropper, 2010, p. 158). In summary, being gay in the context of the novel is read as performing somebody else's gender and must be avoided by straight males by whatever means necessary.

As noted, direct homophobia is more graphic in *The Book of Joe* than in *Boy Meets Boy* and, unsurprisingly, the plot is also heavily centered around policing behavior which disrupts heteronormativity while giving non-disruptive individuals some leverage. Wayne is, for example, an important asset to the school's basketball team, which gives him a "jock status" that protects him from repercussions (Tropper, 2010, p. 33); he is able to escape degrading

treatment due to his masculinity. For example, when Wayne is outed as homosexual, he is given an opportunity from coach Dugan to undo all the rumors. Coach Dugan makes it clear that he is merely looking after one of his boys and that the school would never “reach out and embrace a faggot” (Tropper, 2010, p. 160).

Sammy’s treatment proves Dugan’s statement throughout the novel. Due to being identified as a ‘fag’, he is never embraced for who he is. In fact, when Sammy is subjected to degrading and violent homophobia, which had him end up in the hospital for stitches, his bullies only received a two-day suspension because of Dugan’s influence on the school principal. Thus, this supports the pattern Crisp (2008) noted in their study of *Rainbow Boys*, namely that being a feminine homosexual man gets you harassed, whereas being a masculine homosexual man allows you to primarily escape said harassment. Given how common homophobia and graphic homophobic violence is in the novel, it reinforces a trope where there seems to be no prohibition to depict homophobic violence against homosexual men (Fuoss, 1994). This trope is, as previously noted, common in the LGBT+ young adult literature (Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Fuoss, 1994).

4.1.3 Should we bring these novels into the classroom?

The Swedish National Agency for Education (2011b) emphasize in the policy document for the English subject that students “should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, *social issues* and *cultural features in different contexts* and parts of the world where English is used” (emphasis mine, p. 1). The equal value of all individuals, including LGBT+ ones, are social issues one should explore according to the curriculum. However, if a teacher does not problematize the homophobic violence and the stereotyping of LGBT+ individuals within the novels, then students might take these portrayals for granted.

Homophobic violence should not be portrayed as an inevitability in the lives of homosexual men, yet Crisp (2009) argues that this is the case because homophobia is included as a norm in many LGBT+ content novels. A teacher might bring in these texts thinking that they will actively combat homophobia, but uncritically allowing one's students to embrace these texts might not have the intended effect of doing so. The Swedish National Agency for Education (2011a) states that all kinds of degrading treatment towards individuals should actively be combated, and reinforcing homophobia as an inevitability might work against that policy. Likewise, my interpretation of these two novels' use of homophobia is that they almost parrot the norm that was brought up in the report by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2009), namely that homophobic slurs are primarily directed at effeminate men. Considering these factors, a teacher might need to incorporate other teaching methods or materials to better work towards fostering democratic values amongst their students.

My analysis is critical of *Boy Meets Boy*'s portrayal of homophobia; however, Wickens (2011) offers a different reading. They argue that *Boy Meets Boy* does not reinforce homophobia as an inevitability. They argue against Crisp's (2009) argument that homophobia is reinforced in many LGBT+ novels. Instead, Wickens suggests that "*Boy Meets Boy* avoids this quandary altogether through its blurred genre narrative structure" (2011, p. 160). I agree with their interpretation that the narrative structure does challenge the homophobia, but the fact of the matter is that the homophobia is there to begin with, in what is presented as an LGBT+ inclusive community. As Crisp (2009) argues, a "book that seeks to educate readers about homophobia and intolerance by presenting a world in which homophobia and intolerance are 'the norm' *on some level*, ultimately reinforces these as inevitabilities" (emphasis mine, p. 344). There is proof of homophobia and intolerance being the norm within the novel. For example, when Paul almost gets beat up by the two wrestlers, he explains that "their grunts were actually insults — queer,

faggot, the usual” (Levithan, 2013, p. 13). The last two words being ‘the usual’ indicates that these insults are routinely used within the world of the novel.

However, that is not to say that *Boy Meets Boy* is a bad novel to use in the classroom. Town (2017) argues for example that *Boy Meets Boy* presents a world where one can choose to love whomever one chooses to love. Additionally, in their analysis of *Boy Meet Boy*’s utopic dimensions, Pattee (2008) argues that “[t]he characters’ sexualities and sexual identities are so unproblematic that they are introduced in practically banal terms” (p. 165), in other words, sexualities which are not heterosexual are seen as quite normal and portrayed as such. For example, Paul’s love interest Noah does not fit into a binary categorization of gender, nor is he subjected to homophobia in the novel. There is also Tony, who is subjected to a different kind of homophobia and who also does not fit into these binary categories. These three gay characters have different personalities and might open an opportunity to disrupt heteronormative ideas of what ‘being gay’ means amongst students.

The use of *Boy Meets Boy* to represent different homosexual identities might be useful to combat homophobia and assumptions about homosexuals in classrooms. For example, McLean and Gibson (1999) reasoned that a teacher’s use of *The Color Purple*, which is a piece of literature featuring a lesbian relationship, allowed students to “get a glimpse of another perspective” (p. 63), which helped them confront their homophobia. Therefore, *Boy Meets Boy* might also serve a similar function in classrooms. If one were to use *Boy Meets Boy* in the classroom, then one could perhaps ask students to imagine themselves as one of the characters within the novel, so that they do not have to be personally confronted as homophobic. Activities such as roleplaying or writing fanfiction could be used for such purposes since they involve students imagining themselves inside of the world of the novel. On the other hand, it is questionable whether *The Book of Joe* could provide with such alternative perspectives since it is so entrenched in heteronormative portrayals of LGBT+ individuals.

4.2 The Enemies of the Gays are Straight Jocks and Christianity

This section of the analysis will discuss how masculine straight males are portrayed as the enemies and how indirect homophobia usually takes a religious angle in the novels. This section will conclude with a discussion on the issues raised by this reading for the educational context.

4.2.1 Straight masculine men are the problem.

One aspect both of the novels seem to enforce is that if you are normative, which is to be straight, masculine, and a man, then you are a problem. In *Boy Meets Boy*, Joni's new boyfriend Chuck is portrayed as masculine and as an annoying element to the group dynamic. He is the guy that asserts his right to the front seat of the car by simply taking it and then "blasts some Testosterone Rock, the kind of music best suited for 'professional' wrestling compilations", much to the dismay of Tony and Paul (Levithan, 2013, p. 89). Chuck also reacts negatively to anything that might bring his masculinity and heterosexuality into question. For example, he does not want to play mini-golf with Joni, since it is "for wusses" (Levithan, 2013, p. 80). Chuck fears being labeled 'a wuss' and people seeing him play a sport 'for wusses'.

Chuck's reaction exemplifies Butler's (1999) claim that repeated stylized acts are rigidly enforced and seen as natural. It is a problem for the heteronormative male character with masculine attributes to be perceived as a 'wuss', it is seen as unnatural for him to do. Therefore, Chuck cannot play mini-golf. There is a moment where we are led to believe that Chuck is somewhat of an ally and not as heteronormative as he is portrayed. When he states his negative opinion on Tony being threatened by his parents to go on a church retreat, it could be read as him criticizing Tony's parents for their homophobic prejudice, but it is overshadowed by the fact that just a page later he believes that he is being called gay by Ted, where the only proper response is to shout out: "Who are you calling a gay boy, loser?" (Levithan, 2013, p. 92). What

follows is a pinball duel between Ted and Chuck as some show of dominance, which would have spiraled into a physical fight if it were not for Tony intervening.

Boy Meets Boy's Ted is in contrast to Chuck a better role model since he is portrayed as a reformed homophobe. He swears that one day the group will free Tony from his parents' homophobia, and when he is talking with Paul about his feelings towards Joni, he claims that Paul is a "not that bad, Gay Boy" (Levithan, 2013, p. 139). Paul's immediate reply hints at Ted being a good example of a normative person since he is not too bad himself, "for a guy" (Levithan, 2013, p. 139). This is Paul and Ted being supportive of each other despite their differences, however, there is a heteronormative implication here that there is a difference between being a gay boy and a guy. Ted would also have been more sympathetic if it were not for the fact that he insulted Paul by calling him a 'fag' in third grade in an attempt to win the title of class president. Moreover, Ted's reformation only occurs after he had lost due to homophobia being unfashionable in their community. This begs the question whether he would have reformed at all in a different society.

Another example of a 'reformed' homophobe comes from when Paul got tackled by two wrestlers. One of the wrestlers, Paul claims, became a drag queen. The idea that highly homophobic individuals are just closeted homosexuals might be a problematic element to introduce to students. I am not claiming that highly homophobic individuals that might be closeted homosexuals do not exist, but one might read this idea of closeted homophobes as an excuse for such behavior. This reading becomes encouraged by Paul who likes to think he had something to do with one of the wrestlers becoming a drag queen (Levithan, 2013, p. 13). Paul's reasoning provides two implications. Firstly, it suggests that almost beating up a gay boy might motivate a closeted homosexual to embrace their true selves. Secondly, Paul seems to justify the homophobia through the wrestler's becoming of a drag queen, as if homophobic violence were to be 'accepted' as long as the perpetrator is homosexual themselves.

The Book of Joe, with its policing of feminine behavior amongst men, also asserts that being straight, masculine, and male is to be problematic. The homophobia of the society is reproduced through nearly every straight and masculine man, except for Joe's nephew Jared and Joe's brother Brad. However, I would argue that neither Jared, who is a pot-smoking and delinquent adolescent, nor Brad, who mostly cares about becoming the next high school basketball coach, present good role models to straight readers. The 'inevitable' bullying and societal pressure from this society leads to Sammy committing suicide. The death of LGBT+ characters is, as Cart and Jenkins (2006) note, quite common in LGBT+ content novels; however, they also note that this trope is in the process of changing for the better. *The Book of Joe* cannot be said to constitute a part of this process.

4.2.2 Sinners in Christian households.

In their study of 17 LGBT+ content novels, Wickens' (2011) findings indicate that portraying homosexuality as abnormal, sinful, and as a perversion, with intertextual allusions to biblical scripture, is a common element in LGBT+ novels. Likewise, *The Book of Joe* also features this element. Wayne's mother in *The Book of Joe* is devout and very much against Wayne's homosexuality. On the other hand, *Boy Meets Boy* deals with this element in a different manner. The first page of the novel makes it clear that Tony's parents are "extremely religious", and that they do not understand his sexuality, since they are "set on misunderstanding so many things" (Levithan, 2013, p. 1). However, later in the novel, Tony challenges their homophobia and assumptions, which leads to them gradually becoming less policing of Tony.

In *The Book of Joe*, Christianity is implied to be non-compatible with homosexuality through the actions of the religious characters. Mrs. Hargrove, Wayne's mother, fears that her child will end up in hell due to his sinful behavior. She is presented as quite an unsympathetic and uncompassionate individual. The following extract is taken from when Joe returns with Wayne to his house after going for a couple of drinks earlier.

“I’m praying for your father,” she says.

“And what about your son?”

She frowns and looks heavenward. “I pray for his soul.”

“He’s not dead yet,” I say. “I think he could use a little less praying and a little more compassion.”

“He has sinned against the Lord. He’s paying the price.” (Tropper, 2010, p. 117)

For Mrs. Hargrove, sinning is unacceptable and abiding by the rules within her interpretation of the scripture is the main priority. Therefore, a little more compassion is not something she can show towards her son. By praying for his soul and looking towards heaven, she indicates that she would like Wayne to go to heaven. However, she also asserts that should Wayne not do so, then he is at fault for having sinned. He is after all a sinner who is ‘paying the price’. This homophobia is direct since Wayne is denied compassion due to his sexuality, but it is also indirect because it paints Wayne’s sexuality as sinful.

Mrs. Hargrove was also the one to discover Wayne and Sammy “in the steaming throes of naked passion” and her reaction was to kick Wayne out of the house (Tropper, 2010, p. 152). When she discovers that Wayne started staying at Sammy’s place, she went over there demanding that Wayne sees her priest. Mrs. Hargrove wanting Wayne to see a priest indicates that there is a belief that his behavior is sinful, and that sinful behavior is something one must repent from. Penance is the process where one is forgiven for past sins, but it carries the implication that one should change one’s way of living to a more virtuous one. Comparably, Dugan sees Wayne’s relationship with Sammy merely as “adolescent experimentation” (Tropper, 2010, p. 159), and so too does Mrs. Hargrove, albeit a sinful one.

This ‘Christian’ perspective of seeing homosexual attraction as sinful implies that homosexual attraction is alterable or to some degree not truly set in stone. *Boy Meets Boy* supports this reasoning with Tony’s Christian parents. When his parents found out that he was gay, they did not scold him, “instead they prayed loudly, delivering all of their disappointment

and rage and guilt to him in the form of an address to God” (Levithan, 2013, p. 96). As Paul claims, Tony’s parents “think that Tony’s personality is simply a matter of switches, and that if they find the right one, they can turn off his attraction to other guys and put him back on the road to God” (Levithan, 2013, p. 70). The way Tony is treated by his parents also reinforces an idea that, for Christians, being homosexual is sinful and alterable behavior.

However, *Boy Meets Boy* differs from *The Book of Joe* in that regard since it presents the ‘Christian’ perspective as alterable as well. For example, Tony is subjected to direct homophobia when he is not allowed talk to Paul on the phone or see Paul after Tony’s parents found out that they have hugged each other. Paul sneaks into Tony’s place while his mom is out. His mom comes home, and Tony asks Paul to stay with him. By displaying the masculine attributes of assertiveness and courage, Tony manages to challenge his mom’s authority and homophobia.

“We’re going to do some homework,” Tony says.

She looks straight at him. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” ...

“Why?” Tony asks — the kind of word that is thrown like a stone. ...

“I don’t want to talk about this right now,” she says. ...

“We don’t have to talk about it. But Paul’s going to stay until he has to go home for dinner.” (Levithan, 2013, p. 154)

Challenging the authority of his mother leads to a change in his parents’ attitude towards their own oppression of Tony. Tony calls Paul later that same day, indicating that he can talk to Paul again. He informs Paul that although Paul will not be able to see the inside of his bedroom for a while, he is going to be seeing a lot of their kitchen, as long as he keeps his hands to himself. Tony’s parents clearly still fear the influence that Paul is believed to have on their son and his sexuality, but are willing to allow their friendship to continue. Town (2017) makes a similar reading of the scene, stating that “while they don’t exactly condone his behavior, they learn to respect his right to determine his own friends” (p. 167).

4.2.3 'Failed' performances in a compulsory system.

The portrayal of homosexuality as alterable and the vilification of heteronormative straight masculine men ties well into two of Judith Butler's (1999) arguments in *Gender Trouble*. Firstly, Butler (1999) argues that the system which regulates gender attributes is a compulsory system and that those who fail to "do their gender right" are punished (p. 178). Secondly, as mentioned earlier, Butler argues that there is a heterosexualization of desire which requires and institutes a binary opposition between the male and female bodies. If adhering to binary gender attributes is normal in a compulsory system where heterosexual desire is the norm, then homosexual acts might appear as 'failed' performances to do one's gender 'right'.

The reason why Christian households might see these acts as 'failed' performances could be due to the fact that many interpretations of biblical scripture see marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman. Tony and Wayne have failed within a compulsory system upheld by a heteronormative perspective on marriage. Thus, they are punished. These depictions might be used to instigate discussions with students where they are to discuss why homosexuals might be more likely to face homophobia within religious households and how one might work against such oppression. However, this would require an educator who highlights that this perspective is one among many. Not doing so might go against the Swedish curriculum which states that no one should be discriminated against based on their religion or belief system (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a). Depictions where religion and homosexuality are seen as incompatible and religion is portrayed as evil might instill antireligious ideas in our students.

Likewise, the depiction of straight masculine males as enemies in these novels might also be problematic for an educational context. Although the vilifying of heteronormative straight masculine men could be a way for the authors to highlight who is keeping the compulsory system intact, it potentially vilifies some of our students. Crisp (2009) argues, for example, that

[b]ooks that depict gay males in ways that seem familiar for those who identify as heterosexual may help such readers feel they have a better understanding of what gay people may be like, but when the images are distorted by normative depictions and publishing restrictions, such titles can simply reinscribe the stereotypes they seek to confront. (p. 345)

The same argument could be made with heterosexual individuals in mind instead of homosexual individuals. An LGBT+ content book which is exclusive towards straight masculine male readers sends mixed messages to educators who want to include these novels in whole class readings. One should perhaps be careful to not reinforce us versus them depictions. How is a straight and masculine reader supposed to find a role model with which they can confront their homophobia with if the novel they are reading portrays their identity as exclusively problematic?

5. Conclusion

This essay set out to examine the following research questions through a qualitative content analysis informed by Queer theory:

1. How does homophobia and masculinity/femininity inform and construct the male homosexual identities in the novels?
2. In what way can the novels be used to inform students of the issues and problems that face the LGBT+ community?

The findings found that both novels position feminine gays against masculine straight males. In *Boy Meets Boy* and *The Book of Joe*, the victim of violent homophobia is a femininely coded homosexual; the perpetrators are masculine coded individuals. Both novels also present straight and masculine males as a problematic element in the stories. The straight, masculine, and male characters are afraid to be perceived as feminine and act out aggressively against anything which would indicate that they are feminine. These characters are also presented as being or having been homophobic. Thus, the positioning of feminine against masculine supports Butler's (1999) theory that gender is perceived through stylized repetitive acts where some acts are deemed to be masculine and others as feminine.

Another finding was that *The Book of Joe* contains elements other researchers have found in LGBT+ content novels. These elements were: graphic homophobic violence (Fuoss, 1994), homosexual relationships being portrayed as having one feminine and masculine partner (Crisp, 2008), and the death of homosexuals (Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Fuoss, 1994). Due to *The Book of Joe* containing these elements, an educator might reinforce these ideas amongst students by bringing in the novel uncritically. *Boy Meets Boy*, on the other hand, might prove to be a better material for such purposes since it features a more diverse cast of characters and the homophobia is neither graphic nor an overarching problem within the novel. However, since

both of the novels position straight masculine males and Christianity as the enemies of homosexuality, one might not want to bring the novels uncritically into the classroom to inform students of the issues that face LGBT+ individuals. Straight masculine male students might not find a role model to confront their own homophobia with, and antireligious sentiment might be instilled into students.

A limitation with the study was that the findings and the interpretations of the problematic elements within these novels are limited to the novels themselves. Whether the problematic elements prove to actually be problematic in practice is something which needs to be examined more closely in future research projects. The literature review in the introduction suggested that using LGBT+ content texts in practice can change students' perceptions of homosexuality (see e.g., Athanases, 1996; Helmer, 2015; McLean & Gibson, 1999). The National Agency for Education (2011a) states that the Swedish education should rest on a scientific basis and best practice. The findings in this essay are a part of the scientific basis, and the way to move forward is to find and examine best practice.

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