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# Male Development in Young Adult Novels: Mapping the Intersections Between Masculinity, Fatal Illness, Male Queerness, and Brotherhood

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Male Development in Young Adult Novels: Mapping the Intersections of Masculinity, Fatal  
Illness, Male Queerness, and Brotherhood

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An Honors Thesis  
Submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with honors in English  
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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Chapter One.....	15
<i>“A Pitiful Boy Who Desperately Wanted Not to Be Pitiful”:     Masculinity and Sexuality in     Young Adult Cancer Novels</i>	
Chapter Two.....	49
<i>Freak, Loner, Revolutionary: Masculinity and Gender Roles in Contemporary Young     Adult Fiction with Gay Protagonists</i>	
Chapter Three.....	77
<i>Brotherhood and Masculine Identity Development: The Role of Sibling Relationships     When Masculinity is Threatened in Young Adult Literature</i>	
Conclusion.....	108
<i>Threats to Masculinity, the Perpetuation of Heteronormativity, and Hope for Change in     Young Adult Novels</i>	
Primary Texts.....	112
Works Cited.....	113

## Abstract

Since 2000, Young Adult (YA) literature has grown exponentially. The subgenres of cancer novels (teen “sick-lit”) and LGBTQ fiction, in particular, have experienced a recent surge in popularity. The novels in these subgenres that feature young men as the affected characters (diagnosed with cancer and/or identifying as gay or queer) are particularly interesting because of the threats that these experiences pose to heteronormative masculinity. Because this fiction is directed at an impressionable audience in the process of forming their identities, the novels’ representations of gender could have a strong influence over readers’ gender identity development. Researchers have begun exploring the subgenres of teen sick-lit and LGBTQ YA, but rarely through the lens of masculinity or gender identity development; in fact, the concept of masculinity is explored in-depth in only one literary critic’s analysis of an LGBTQ series. Given the lack of critical analyses on masculine gender representations in these two subgenres, as well as the threats to masculinity posed to characters within these narratives, there is a clear need for critical work examining gender representations in YA cancer novels and novels with gay protagonists.

After analyzing a representative sample of these novels through the lens of sociological research on the significance of masculinity for young men negotiating a cancer diagnosis or gay identity, I observed the centrality of masculinity to the stories’ narratives and character development. I additionally observed the influence of sibling relationships on male protagonists’ gender identity development in both subgenres. Overall, cancer and gay-themed novels with male protagonists tended to reinforce heteronormative gender roles, unhealthy expectations of masculinity, and a rejection of femininity. However, many novels with gay protagonists did present alternative, somewhat feminized masculinities, and the settings of two novels provided models for societies that challenge gender boundaries. Sibling relationships, another largely unexamined aspect of YA novels, sometimes perpetuated problematic gender stereotypes, but siblings were mostly positive influences on protagonists’ gender identity development.

## Introduction

Young adult (YA) literature has become one of the most popular ‘genres’ available today; Michael Cart, a researcher of young adult literature, claims that 2000 marked the start of “the second golden age of young adult fiction,” as the turn of the millennium marked the point at which “the book world began marketing directly to teens” (Strickland). According to Cart, fantasy and dystopian series were a big part of the rapid growth of YA, particularly after the introduction of the *Harry Potter* series, but author and cognitive scientist Jennifer Lynn Barnes says that since then, “Contemporary standalones, or non-serials, have returned to the forefront as a lighter response to dark paranormal and dystopian series” (qtd. in Strickland).

The growing popularity of young adult literature is particularly significant because of the potential these novels have to influence young readers<sup>1</sup>. In her article “Pushing the Envelope: Exploring Sexuality in Teen Literature,” Eleanor Wood cites the American Psychological Association’s finding that “literature is a valuable way for young adults to ‘try on different social masks’ in forming their identity.” She also references researcher Diane Emge’s assertion that “Experiences described in novels have profound influence on their teen readers—yet another reason to categorize them as ‘coming of age’ stories.” With this power to impact young adults’ identity formation, unique in its offer of close psychic relation to a protagonist’s own struggles

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<sup>1</sup> Young readers actually constitute a surprisingly low percentage of the readers of Young Adult novels: according to a Nielsen Market Research study cited in Melissa Dahl’s “The Dudes Who Read Young Adult Fiction,” only 20% of the readers are ages 13-17. Additionally, 60.5% of readers were females, while 39.5% were men. For this study, I am only considering the effects that gender role representations may have on young readers (under the age of 18), but it is possible that the effects may be similar for older age ranges. I also consider the effects of these representations of both male and female readers, though I am more concerned in my analysis with the influence on conceptions of masculinity for male readers. In reviewing these statistics, it is important to emphasize that the research did not take into account readers under 13, who likely make up a significant percentage of YA readership, and did not specify whether data was collected only on YA book purchasers (likely to skew numbers if adults purchase books for their children) or if more reliable research methods were employed.

with identity development, the presentation of gender identities in these texts has broader implications than simply entertaining young readers. Gender representations in young adult novels thus can give readers models to emulate as well as new perspectives on gender roles and expectations that, hopefully, take the shape of greater understanding of and empathy with others.

The representations of gender in young adult novels, then, can have a significant impact on the way teenaged readers develop their own opinions on gender, standards for heteronormativity, and, perhaps most significantly, their own gender identities. During adolescence, when teenagers are engaging in a great deal of identity development work, gender roles and expectations become useful tools for establishing one's identity in relation to others. Though dominant cultural gender roles are influential—and often harmful—to teens of any gender identity, adolescent men experience unique standards and expectations for their gender expressions, particularly in the context of high school. Sociologist and masculinity researcher C.J. Pascoe performed an intensive study on a California high school in her book *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. In the study, she explores the high expectations of masculinity for young men perpetuated in this high school's culture, most prominently by the students themselves, and the effects these expectations have on teens of all genders, but especially on young men.

Before analyzing these findings, however, Pascoe establishes important contexts for understandings of gender and masculinity in high school that carry over to my own research well because of the age group represented in these novels and targeted as the audience. She begins by attempting to define the term “masculinity,” a term that changes meaning across time and place. Pascoe emphasizes that masculinity cannot be defined as something so essentializing as behaviors enacted by biological males because “this definition conflates masculinity with the

actions of those who have male bodies. Defining masculinity as ‘what men do’ reifies biologized categories of male and female that are problematic and not necessarily discrete categories to begin with” (9). Instead, the concept of masculinity must be understood through a variety of lenses. Pascoe uses feminist psychoanalytic theory that demonstrates how American culture “equate[s] contemporary masculinity with a quest for autonomy and separation, an approach that influences [her] own analysis of masculinity” (6). She additionally draws upon uses the work of R.W. Connell, who suggested that there are multiple ‘types’ of masculinities. Pascoe details each of these categories, but emphasizes that Connell’s ‘types’ are meant to be interpreted “as fluid and conflictual” (8), rather than a means of further categorizing men and their gender practices:

*Hegemonic masculinity*, the type of gender practice that, in a given space and time, supports gender inequality, is at the top of this hierarchy. *Complicit masculinity* describes men who benefit from hegemonic masculinity but do not enact it; *subordinated masculinity* describes men who are oppressed by definitions of hegemonic masculinity, primarily gay men; *marginalized masculinity* describes men who may be positioned powerfully in terms of gender but not in terms of class or race [...]. Very few men, if any, are actually hegemonically masculine, but all men do benefit, to different extents, from this sort of definition of masculinity. (7)

These theoretical contexts lay a foundation for a definition of masculinity, but for the purposes of this project, a more materially-grounded definition is necessary. The terms ‘hegemonic,’ ‘traditional,’ and ‘heteronormative’ masculinity will be used throughout this study to refer to

variations on the definition of the “complete, unblushing American male” offered by Erving Goffman:

a young, white, married, urban, northern heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports [...] Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself [...] as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior” (qtd. in Kimmel 85).

This very specific—and almost completely unachievable—definition of masculinity is the hegemonic standard against which men are generally positioned in contemporary American culture. In my analysis, I will refer to “traditional masculinity” and “heteronormative masculinity,” both of which refer to the roles and standards outlined in this definition of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>2</sup>

Michael Kimmel offers a more in-depth analysis of what it means to be masculine in our culture in his article “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity.” Kimmel explains the historical roots of American expectations for masculinity. The preoccupation with being a “self-made man,” Kimmel argues, is “a model of

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Heteronormative’ refers to the idea of male and female gender roles as complementary where heterosexuality is the cultural norm. Butler uses the similar concept of the “heterosexual matrix” to describe cultural expectations that people must have “a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (Gender Trouble 151). When I use the term ‘heteronormative masculinity’ throughout my analysis, it refers to hegemonic standards of masculinity, as they prescribe gender roles for men expected in the heterosexual matrix. When otherwise using the term ‘heteronormative,’ I am referring to the broader societal expectations of heterosexuality and of differing, unequal, and complementary gender roles between men and women.

masculinity for whom identity is based on homosocial competition [...]. It is this notion of manhood – rooted in the sphere of production, the public arena [...] – this has been the defining notion of American manhood. Masculinity must be proved, and no sooner is it proved that it is again questioned and must be proved again – constant, relentless, unachievable” (83). The inherent sense of competition in this cultural framework for understanding masculinity has led to expectations of power and control in men. As Kimmel explains, this concept of masculinity emerges in four societal ideals summarized by psychologist Robert Brannon: “One may never do anything that even remotely suggests femininity. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine”; “Masculinity is measured by power, success, wealth, and status”; “Masculinity depends on remaining calm and reliable in a crisis, holding emotions in check. In fact, proving you’re a man depends on never showing your emotions at all”; and finally, one must “Exude an aura of manly daring and aggression” (qtd. in Kimmel 86).

Most important of all of these characteristics of ideal masculinity, Kimmel argues, is the first: “Whatever the variations by race, class, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, being a man means ‘not being like women.’ This anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than who one is” (86). According to Kimmel, this takes the form of a renunciation of the feminine through repudiation of the mother and the desire to gain the approval of other men. But this need for homosocial approval invokes homophobia, which Kimmel defines as “the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men [...]. As adolescents, we learn that our peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies” (88-89). The constant and extreme pressure to live up to unrealistic standards of masculinity has led to anti-femininity and

homophobia driving the enactment of manhood in America. As Kimmel explains, “Women and gay men become the ‘other’ against which heterosexual men project their identities, against whom they stack the decks so as to compete in a situation in which they will always win, so that by suppressing them, men can stake a claim for their own manhood” (90).

In order to understand masculinity defined in opposition to femininity, we must also define the term “feminine.” In many ways, it can be seen as the opposite of masculinity. Traditionally, women are compared to Freudian expectations of femininity, a framework of gender differences that relies heavily on differences in men’s and women’s gender roles. For Freud, women are expected to be passive (relative to the active male), narcissistic because of the wound caused by penis envy, jealous, and mentally inferior to men (Flanagan 68-69). Likewise, in contrast to Goffman’s definition of heteronormative masculinity, a heteronormatively feminine woman would be uneducated, nonathletic, and unemployed, so as not to pose a threat to men. The idealized female body type is not big and strong but rather small, thin, and fragile. The only similar aspects of heteronormative masculinity and femininity are those that enable the oppression of other groups, particularly race and class<sup>3</sup>. The heteronormative woman is, like the heteronormative man, white, middle-class, and Protestant.

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<sup>3</sup> The influences of factors such as race and class are significant and powerful aspects of the development of masculinity, as being outside of white and/or middle-class groups excludes a man from hegemonic masculinity. Threats to masculinity such as a cancer diagnosis or a gay identity, are likely to impact these marginalized groups differently. However, these factors are not examined in this study because marginalized masculine identities are underrepresented in the novels analyzed here. The novels selected feature only three main characters who are people of color, none of whom are protagonists in the cancer novels examined, while the main characters are also predominantly middle-class in both the cancer novels and gay-themed novels examined in this study. Examining these aspects of masculine identity development would have required a broader survey of both sociological literature and young adult novels, and was therefore outside the scope of this project, given the time allotted to complete it. Studying the representations of the effects of threats to masculinity on these marginalized groups in young adult novels is of great interest to me and is a potential area for furthering this research. Readers are also

In addition to the recognition of such explicit and rigid gender roles for masculine men and feminine women, the study of gender also requires the understanding that gender in itself is a social construct and a performance, a concept most famously established by queer theorist Judith Butler in her book, *Gender Trouble*. Butler explains that gender is not a natural, biological phenomenon, but rather is produced by the repetition of certain actions prescribed by societal gender expectations. In *Dude, You're a Fag*, Pascoe integrates theoretical work from Butler's 1993 work *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limitations of 'Sex,'* which suggests that gender is "constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' that subject as its own found repudiation" (qtd. in Pascoe 14). Pascoe explains:

This repudiation creates and reaffirms a 'threatening specter' ([Butler] 3) of failed gender, the existence of which must be continually repudiated through interactional processes [...]. Examining masculinity using Butler's theory of interactional accomplishment of gender indicates that the 'fag' position is an 'abject' position and, as such, is a 'threatening specter' constituting contemporary American adolescent masculinity at River High. (15)

Pascoe adds that, for adolescent boys, "seemingly 'normal' daily interactions of male adolescence are actually ritualized interactions constituting masculinity. These repeated acts involve demonstrating sexual mastery and the denial of girls' subjectivity. The school itself sets

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encouraged to look into the "We Need Diverse Books" movement and other organizations seeking to increase the quantity and quality of representations of diverse populations in children's and young adult books.

the groundwork for boys' interactional rituals of repudiation and confirmation" (15). Pascoe's analysis illuminates the ways that adolescent boys attempt to enact hegemonic, heteronormative masculinity, actions that work to keep gender inequality in place and subordinate and marginalize other groups. With this description of gender expectations for adolescent men, particularly in the high school setting, we understand adolescent masculinity to exclude, or at least be threatened by, certain characteristics or events in a young adult male's life.

As a creative writer, I was inspired by Pascoe's study, as it made me question gender roles from a perspective outside my own—not least, but most obviously, the male perspective—and prompted me to consider the pressures to be masculine perpetuated within and upon the male community as a whole, but particularly within a high school community where identity is central to day to day life, as is "fitting in" with highly judgmental peers fearful of such "threats" as homosexuality in themselves and, consequently, in others. I also stumbled upon a *Sports Illustrated* article by and about Jason Collins, the first openly gay NBA player, in which he described his later-in-life coming-out: in his early 30s, he came out to his twin brother, who had been (along with the rest of his family) kept in the dark about his twin's true sexual identity. When I imagined that already complex family dynamic translated to high school boys already experiencing immense pressure to maintain performances of masculinity, the relationship between the twins became particularly interesting to consider. How would a young adult man deal with his twin brother's homosexuality if so much of the process of establishing one's masculinity necessitates the rejection of threats to masculinity? If a person's identity is, in part, his membership in a twin pair, how does his masculine identity change when the twin aspect of his identity becomes a threat to masculinity? Additionally, how does the gay twin cope with fear

of his twin's reaction, in addition to the other challenges that accompany adolescent sexual identity development?

In the process of drafting a manuscript about this very dynamic, I gave my heterosexual character his own threat to masculinity: a diagnosis of osteosarcoma. Similar questions drove the creation and development of this plotline: How does a cancer diagnosis impact masculine identity development, and how can an adolescent boy cope with these effects? How does his twin deal not only with his brother's potential death, but also with the emasculation that likely follows cancer treatment for his brother? Finally, as I wrote the novel manuscript, I questioned how my own—and other authors'—representations of these fraught dynamics could potentially influence young adults' beliefs about gender roles and gender identity development in their own communities and within themselves. As a writer from outside of these oppressed communities, I hold myself responsible for representing these groups accurately and respectfully, but I also hold myself responsible for challenging problematic gender roles and expectations in our society in the hopes that young adult readers will think critically about gender in their own cultures. Though authors' only duty is, in my opinion, to tell a story, I also believe that authors should be mindful of the impact their stories may have on young readers' beliefs about themselves and others, and that authors, therefore, should feel some ethical responsibility to offer positive representations of gender for their readers. This feeling of authors' ethical responsibility to readers led me to wonder: do depictions of masculinity in young adult novels dealing with fatal illness, male queerness, and brotherhood overall challenge or reinforce contemporary gender roles? These various questions drove my research for this project. I attempted, with varying success, to find sociological studies on masculinity in adolescent men who identify as gay or were diagnosed with a potentially fatal illness such as cancer, and on how brotherhood affects

masculine identity development in each of those instances. I also sought out critical work that examines issues of masculinity in YA novels that represent male characters that are diagnosed with cancer, that are gay-themed<sup>4</sup>, and/or that feature siblings, especially brothers. Finally, I used this sociological and critical research, in addition to the theoretical framework and cultural contexts provided by Pascoe's work, as a foundation for my own critical analyses of young adult cancer novels and gay-themed novels.

In chapter one of this analysis, I examine gender role representations in novels about young men diagnosed with cancer, looking for the ways that the effects of cancer on masculinity are depicted in the novels and how these depictions challenge or reinforce dominant gender expectations. In chapter two, I analyze novels with gay protagonists to see how the characters negotiate the challenge that homosexuality inherently poses to their masculinity and whether these negotiations successfully challenge gender expectations. Finally, in chapter three, I look at many of the same novels again, re-reading them through the lens of sibling relationships and contemplating how the presence of siblings affects the protagonist's masculine identity development, and whether or not the gender of the protagonist's sibling makes a difference to those influences. Across all of these analyses, I found a general trend of gender role reinforcement, both in novels featuring cancer patients and in novels featuring a gay protagonist, though there were certainly exceptions to this rule. However, depictions of relationships with brothers, as well as sisters, in these novels often suggest potential challenges to contemporary gender boundaries and sometimes even make such challenges more overtly.

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<sup>4</sup> Though 'gay-themed' implies that a novel deals primarily with a character's sexual identity, for this project, the phrase 'gay-themed' is used to denote young adult books in which there is a gay protagonist. The novel's central themes may be directly linked to homosexuality or may be largely unrelated to sexual orientation. I use the term as shorthand for "novels with gay protagonists" or "novels with gay content" throughout this analysis.

These findings informed how I read my own novel manuscript, giving me significant insight into the ways that my representations of illness, male queerness, and brotherhood and the consequent differences in masculine identity development both challenge and reinforce contemporary gender roles and expectations. In chapter four, I explore how my novel manuscript fits into the conversation of other young adult novels that address these issues, and I suggest potential revisions to my manuscript that will help me to represent these issues more responsibly and to make more effective challenges to heteronormative gender roles and expectations. To tie the study together, I apply some of these changes to a thirty-page excerpt that I revised for craft issues in Spring 2015 under the advisement of Megan Atwood. The project, as a whole, is an investigation into representations of gender in two popular subgenres of realistic young adult fiction that finds places where the genres have room to grow, as well as instances where individual novels and some overarching trends already challenge normative gender boundaries. The project also suggests areas for future investigation into the genre, including the need for a broader survey of depictions of brotherhood and masculinity, or gender roles and sibling relationships more generally, in young adult novels; analyses of gender roles in depictions of other queer communities in young adult novels; and investigations of gender role representations in other genres of young adult fiction.

## Chapter 1

### “A Pitiful Boy Who Desperately Wanted Not to Be Pitiful”: Masculinity, Gender, and Sexuality in Young Adult Cancer Novels

The recent “sick-lit<sup>5</sup>” trend in the Young Adult genre, deemed by Tanith Carey a “disturbing phenomenon” in her controversial *Daily Mail* article, has garnered much media attention since the release of films like *The Fault in Our Stars*, based on John Green’s novel of the same name, and *Now is Good*, based on Jenny Downham’s novel *Before I Die*. But, as evidenced by Julie Passanante Elman’s analysis of 1980s sick-lit, “Nothing Feels as Real: Teen Sick-Lit, Sadness, and the Condition of Adolescence,” cancer novels were enormously popular well before these contemporary bestsellers came out.

Many articles debating the merits of teen sick-lit, along with lists of cancer novel recommendations, have been posted online by librarians, fans, journalists, and critics.<sup>6</sup> The novels generally receive high ratings on sites like goodreads.com and Amazon. Lurlene McDaniel, whose seventy-plus novels are widely regarded by literary critics as “the *Lifetime* movies of cancer books” (A. West) and the “close cousin” of trashy romance novels (Elman 188), has an average rating of 4.09 out of 5 stars on goodreads.com, and similarly high ratings

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<sup>5</sup> “Sick-lit” is a derogatory term for novels in which a character is diagnosed with cancer or another similar illness, not necessarily limited to young adult novels. The term emphasizes the use of cancer or a similar diagnosis as a plot device and, in its play on the term “chick-lit,” suggests that the novels are of little literary merit and directed at a female audience. I use the term occasionally throughout the analysis, particularly when discussing the subgenre as a whole (which may not necessarily feature cancer as the tragic illness affecting the character), but prefer using the term “cancer novels” when possible as it is more accurate and less demeaning.

<sup>6</sup> For example: vulture.com, “I Was Obsessed with YA Cancer Novels Long Before *The Fault in Our Stars*” by Margaret Lyons; examiner.com, “Top 10 Young Adult Books that Help Teens Cope with Cancer” by Rektok Ross; yalibrariantales.com, xojane.com, “YA Books and Cancer”; “‘Sick-Lit’ is Nothing New—Here’s Why it Matters” by S.E. Smith; smithsonianmag.com, “Teen ‘Sick-Lit’ Should Leave Parents Feeling Queasy” by Rachel Nuwer.

from Amazon and Barnes and Noble customers. Carey suggests that readers assess cancer novels not for their literary merit, cultural messages, or scientific accuracy, but rather evaluate them based on the novels' emotional impact, with the prospect of being left "devastated" a positive selling point (Carey).

With so many cancer novels being picked up and held dearly by teen readers (and readers from many other age groups), the novels have great potential to influence their audiences—and with it, a unique capacity to break certain stereotypes. As Elman points out, teen sick-lit elaborates "the queerness of illness," or illness's inherent challenges to heteronormativity (187):

Characters with disabilities or diseases are often desexualized within dominant culture, a tendency teen sick-lit occasionally resists when it celebrates eroticized ill bodies and transformative crip sexuality. [...] Perhaps because illness within teen sick-lit often suspends certain age-related prohibitions regulating sexual behavior, some teen sick-lit tacitly legitimates pre-marital (heterosexual) sexual intimacy that might otherwise be discouraged. Most importantly, teen sick-lit has the transgressive crip potential to eroticize zones that are "supposed" to be antiseptic and asexual by reveling in sexual adventures in hospital rooms and ill bodies. (186-187)

Yet beyond demonstrating that sick and disabled youth have sexual desires, permissible largely because of impending death or separation, few other gender boundaries are transgressed. For the most part, the cancer novels that critics have analyzed send messages about gender and sexuality that reinforce heteronormative gender ideals. For example, Elman points out that sick-

lit of the 1980s, despite emerging shortly after second-wave feminism's rise, "demonstrates an assiduous reconsolidation of traditional, heteronormative, white femininity and an anxious disavowal of liberal second-wave feminist ideals. McDaniel's texts encourage and enforce adherence to traditional gender roles because it is part of 'getting well'" (181). In the texts Elman examines, girls with cancer are preoccupied with their appearances and pass their time giving each other makeovers, and they assess their attractiveness based on the acceptance they receive from other characters, especially boys. This pattern also illustrates one of the major characteristics of teen sick-lit that Elman identifies: compulsory heterosexuality. She points out, "Tracing the contours of gendered teen bodies, these novels establish normative gender complementarity and heterosexual romance as a salve for ill teen protagonists" (180).

Literary critic Imogen Belcher similarly notices the problematic gender roles presented in cancer books in her dissertation *Curing Cancer Fiction: The Significance of Abjection within Young Adult Novels about Cancer*. Central to Belcher's analysis is the concept of abjection, or "a societal and personal rejection of that which is deemed sickening, dangerous or unproductive" (14). In the case of cancer novels, Belcher argues, the cancer patient is abject because he or she symbolizes the threat of early death, and the female cancer patient is doubly abject because of her association with "polluting" menstruation (Belcher 7). Beyond this sexism that Belcher sees as inherent in the genre, the female protagonists in many, if not all, of the novels are held to standards of normative femininity and passivity. Yet the standards of femininity and passivity that Belcher notes are in tension with the beauty-centered ideals that Elman problematizes. One of McDaniel's protagonists, Melissa, is "fully eclipsed by her illness. Melissa is portrayed as emblematic of female innocence and purity due to her cancer" (Belcher 14), and Lois Lowry's character Molly is described, when sick, "as more passive, patient and less concerned with

superficial things, such as her beauty, than when compared to her healthy self” (Belcher 32). Furthermore, in McDaniel’s novels, Belcher argues that “female desire is positioned as wholly abject[.] Creed writes: ‘Abjection is constructed as a rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal, female flesh’ and this is a notion proliferated due to McDaniel’s refusal to acknowledge desire, lust or any kind of sexual, bodily craving or experimentation” (Belcher 37). While Elman’s analysis reveals that women diagnosed with cancer are still expected to look beautiful and have heteronormative desires, Belcher finds that women diagnosed with cancer are constructed as even more passive and sexually “pure” than healthy women. Both findings are accurate, and the tension illustrates the impossible, conflicting standards women are held to, the exaggeration of these standards for women coping with chronic and terminal illnesses, and the mixed messages readers receive as to what behavior is appropriate and ideal in women.

Both Elman and Belcher demonstrate that teen sick-lit written before the year 2000 sends negative messages about gender and sexuality—particularly the gender and sexuality of young women—to readers. As Elman asserts, “Teen sick-lit remains extraordinarily popular. Within its pages, heterosexuality and able-bodiedness not only connote happiness but also maturity—an association that bolsters heterosexist and ableist ideas about disability and queerness as infantile, narcissistic, tragic, or eliminable” (187). While their analyses generally hold for the textual dynamics they examine, they do not address other vital aspects of the teen sick-lit genre. Elman’s article, despite being written in 2012, only discusses novels written in the 1980s and early 1990s, and all of the novels she analyzes are from the perspective of female protagonists. Belcher does include contemporary novels in her analysis and she finds that, for the most part, they are markedly different from older novels in their depictions of illness and gender roles. But, like Elman, the novels Belcher examines are all from the perspective of a woman. For those novels

the critics analyze that do feature sick male characters, neither author sufficiently addresses the ways in which male gender roles and sexuality are represented. Elman does point out the preference that McDaniel's female protagonists have for healthy, able-bodied men over those who are or have been sick, but her critique extends only to the ableism perpetuated by a "logic of compulsory able-bodiedness" (Elman 185).

Between the two articles, the only direct discussion of a sick boy's masculinity comes when Belcher brings up the masculinity of Mark, an atypical McDaniel character suffering from cystic fibrosis. His love of racecar driving delineates him as masculine, but because of his disease, he is barred from participating, and when he finally gets the chance, an accident causes his rapid decline and a death that he does not have the masculine virility to fight. Belcher writes,

Mark, it can be argued, has been implicitly positioned as 'lesser' than April and as more deserving of death, perhaps because he is male. Males, stereotypically, are seen as less inherently 'good' than females, and furthermore males are often portrayed wanting to corrupt the sexual 'purity' of a female. [...] Moreover, Mark may have succumbed to death because not only is he male, but he is a male who is unable to reproduce due to his abject illness. (48)

While male characters in the novels Belcher analyzes, including Augustus from *The Fault in Our Stars* and some of the male McDaniel characters brought up by Elman, certainly struggle with their masculinity, Belcher does not perform an in-depth analysis of any other male characters' gender identity or how their masculinity and sexuality are affected by life-threatening illnesses. An analysis of masculinity in male characters with cancer, specifically as represented in more

recent novels, is needed to fill in these gaps in the critical work surrounding young adult cancer novels and sick-lit.

The recent popular success of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*<sup>7</sup> demands such an analysis because of its potential influence over young readers and film viewers. Although Hazel is the main character, Augustus's previous experiences with cancer and his relapse toward the end of the novel are explored in detail in Hazel's narration. *Zac and Mia* by A.J. Betts, which was published in 2013, just one year later than Green's novel, also features a boy and a girl who are both diagnosed with cancer. The novel alternates narration between Zac and Mia, giving readers two different perspectives on Zac's masculinity. A somewhat earlier novel, Chris Crutcher's 2007 *Deadline*, features a male narrator, Ben, who discovers he has terminal "blood disease" (though not stated, presumably leukemia) and chooses to forgo treatment in order to live the last year of his life to its fullest. Finally, *The Time Capsule*, Lurlene McDaniel's 2003 installment in her seemingly endless sick-lit collection, offers a more recent point of reference for teen sick-lit analysis, along with a notably healthy main character, Alexis, from whose perspective we witness her twin brother Adam's relapse of leukemia. Together, these four novels represent dominant and popular trends across the genre. All four novels explore questions of masculinity both directly and indirectly in affected protagonists, without explicitly calling society's standards of masculinity into question. In many ways, the novels push against and even break contemporary gender boundaries, though each novel does so to a very different extent. In the cases of *Zac and Mia*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and *The Time Capsule*, this gender play seems to be enabled by characters' experiences with cancer, while in *Deadline*, the gender boundaries broken are seemingly unrelated to Ben's illness. Despite these deviations, however, the novels

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<sup>7</sup> Green's novel spent over 80 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list (McPherson), and the film adaptation grossed over \$300 million at the box office worldwide (K. West).

overall reinforce today's gender expectations and ideals for young readers and perpetuate the heteronormative gender binary.

### **Gendered Experiences of Cancer and Disability: A Sociological Review**

Recent sociological studies of cancer patients reveal major differences between the experiences of men and women with cancer, differences deriving from the hegemonic gender expectations young adult novels ultimately tend to reinforce. Campbell-Enns and Woodgate performed a comprehensive literature review of studies of young men with cancer, and they concluded that "Cancer was shown to impact the masculine identity of young men." While most studies currently published on masculinity in cancer patients focus on adult men, a fair number included younger patients and a few specifically looked at the experiences of young adults. For the most part, the studies and literature reviews revealed very similar patterns in the impact on young men's masculine identity.<sup>8</sup> Men in the studies were concerned with physical limitations that stemmed from treatment, particularly lessened functionality and ability, changes to their appearance, and sexual dysfunction and potential infertility. Men specifically felt that their body image concerns were not taken as seriously as women's (Cecil et. al.) and that hair loss in particular was feminizing (Hilton et. al., "Have Men Been Overlooked?"). Another consistent finding throughout the literature was that men were often hesitant to disclose their diagnoses to others, both loved ones and acquaintances, both to protect them from the emotional impact of the diagnosis and to ensure that others, particularly coworkers, would treat them normally. Hilton et.

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<sup>8</sup> These findings are repeated across many studies, including Cecil et. al., Campbell-Enns and Woodgate, Carpentier et. al., Hilton et. al. "Have Men Been Overlooked?", Hilton et. al., "Disclosing a Cancer Diagnosis to Friends and Family," Wenger and Oliffe, "Men Managing Cancer: A Gender Analysis."

al. specifically connected the hesitance to disclose a diagnosis to masculinity, explaining, “Given the power of constructions of hegemonic masculinity, it seems likely that some men with cancer will find disclosure problematic because of the importance of constructing and maintaining a masculine identity in opposition to feminine emotional expression (“Disclosing a Cancer Diagnosis to Friends and Family” 745). They also found that “men made up the majority of those who wished to conceal their diagnosis, and were much more likely than women to place these discussions about disclosure in the context of their (gendered) identity” (“Disclosing a Cancer Diagnosis to Friends and Family” 748). Even after disclosure, men did not want to discuss the diagnosis or its emotional impacts, or to impose on their families in any way. Losses of independence were discussed in detail, particularly in studies that focused on younger men who became dependent on family members, a dependence that younger men struggled to cope with (Campbell-Enns and Woodgate, Hilton et. al. “Disclosing a Cancer Diagnosis to Friends and Family”). Men also revealed that they wanted to gain control over their experience with cancer in some way, indicating a desire to reconstruct their masculine identities after the onset of cancer in their lives (Campbell-Enns and Woodgate).

Related to these studies are disability studies focusing on the effects of disability on gender identity. Men with cancer often experience physical limitations they haven’t had to cope with in the past, and because of various treatments, their illness is often visible to the outside world, difficulties that many people with disabilities experience as well. Strikingly similar to the desexualization of cancer patients that Elman describes, people with disabilities “have often been represented as *without gender*, as *asexual* creatures, as freaks of nature, monstrous, the ‘Other’ to the societal norm” (Meekosha 765). Shuttleworth et. al. cite the link between disability and gender in “The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity”:

Elaborating on Asch and Fine's point regarding the contradiction between disability which is associated with personal and physical weakness and masculinity which is associated with personal and physical strength, Hahn noted that this sets up a conflict within disabled men requiring some kind of resolution because many of them tend to identify on both personal and political levels with hegemonic notions of masculinity such as independence and bravado rather than identifying as disabled." (177)

Not only are cancer patients and people with disabilities depicted as weak, but as Meekosha states, "gender stereotypes have been used to characterize disabled people, particularly men, who have been presented as feminized and lacking masculine traits" (766). Meekosha further notes gendered patterns in ways that people frame their disabilities:

Disabled men and women narrate their experiences in significantly gendered terms, with both the content and styles reflecting the ways in which gender expectations are modulated by disability status. Illness narratives are mobilized to make sense of the experiences, which are in each case centered on the impact on sexual identity, sexual relationships, and gender opportunities. (767)

The findings of sociologists in various fields reveal that experiences with illness and disability—two very connected factors—are powerfully linked to gender ideals and identities, particularly in men, for whom the effects of illness and disability can be feminizing. This background

knowledge is significant in framing the discussion of cancer novels' representations of masculinity, and the very gendered experiences of cancer patients.

### **Teen “Sick-Lit” and Gendered Responses to Cancer Diagnoses: The Young Adult Man’s Need to Prove Masculinity**

In each of the four novels, the male protagonists question their masculinity in relation to many different aspects of their identity, and this questioning is almost always a result of a diagnosis of cancer or the effects of the illness or treatment. Concerns about athletic ability, which did not appear in the sociological literature reviewed and which are not notably discussed in relation to masculinity in any popular articles about athletes diagnosed with cancer, appear almost universally in the novels. This preoccupation with diminished ability to compete and prove oneself physically is specific to male protagonists and thus reinforces the centrality of athletic ability to masculinity. Adam, Ben, Augustus, and Zac must give up their preferred sport when they get sick. Adam has to give up his baseball career; Ben signs up for football instead of cross country; Zac is frustrated that he can't play football and feels humiliated over receiving a cricket “consolation prize” (Betts 98), and Augustus admits that his existential crisis over playing basketball happened on what was “coincidentally also my last day of dual leggedness” (Green 31). Ben’s decision to fulfill his “fantasy of playing ball” (Crutcher 19) is particularly telling. He chooses to turn out for football before the effects of his illness begin because he would “rather be a flash than a slowly cooling ember” (Crutcher 10). He justifies the decision by explaining, “the only reason I never turned out before was fear of permanent damage, and permanent won’t last as long now” (Crutcher 20). For Ben, football is as much about proving his skill and being a

“football hero” (Crutcher 76)—appearing athletic and masculine to others—as it is about the love of the game. Ben holds his athletic ability so dear that his breakdown, grieving and begging for more time, happens when he realizes he doesn’t have the strength to go for a run anymore.

Zac, too, is more concerned about the loss of his masculine image than with losing a sport he loves, at least when it comes to his inability to play cricket. When he receives an award for Best Team Player at the end of a cricket season (in which he barely played and, when he did, played badly), he says, “I’m glad that my old mates aren’t around to witness this” (Betts 98) and he’s furious that he’s still getting “charity votes or pity prizes” (Betts 99) after he’s officially clear of leukemia. Even his sister, Bec, tells him that he’ll need to work on his personality in order to impress women, “considering your sporting ability’s gone to pot” (Betts 107).

The two women with cancer in the four novels, Hazel of *The Fault in Our Stars* and Mia of *Zac and Mia*, don’t exhibit anywhere near this level of athleticism or concern about its loss. It is not known whether Hazel ever played sports before she was diagnosed with cancer in her early adolescence, but she doesn’t bring it up or express any regret that she can’t play. Mia reveals that she used to play volleyball—and was “Sportsgirl of the Year” in primary school (Betts 141)—but well before her diagnosis, “it eventually dawned on me that getting up early on Saturday mornings actually sucked. I soon learned there were better things to do with weekends” (Betts 141). Mia experiences no struggles with giving up the sport that she excelled in, and gives it up for free time rather than being forced to quit for the purposes of treatment. That female characters’ athleticism does not need to be reinforced throughout the novels in the way that male characters’ does indicates the cultural association of masculinity and sports and their significance in establishing male characters’ pre- and often post-diagnosis masculinity. Because athletic ability seems to be a nonissue in the sociological studies, these novels set an even higher

standard of masculinity than the already rigorous expectations against which male cancer patients tend to measure themselves. By thus warding off the feminization associated with a cancer diagnosis, the novels reinforce and even exaggerate contemporary gender ideals.

In addition to the male characters' attempts to maintain an athletic image, the importance of leaving behind a legacy is a central theme in all four novels. A diagnosis of cancer means that the teenaged protagonists don't have the opportunity to graduate from high school and make a difference and a name for themselves in the world, a problem that generally bothers only male patients in the novels. Much like the reinforcement of athleticism, legacy is not mentioned in the sociological studies surveyed. While it is possible that questions about leaving a legacy weren't asked of the subjects in these studies, the fact that all four novels ensure that the men leave a mark on the world while no real patients mentioned a need to do so suggests the fictional accounts create it as a plot device and to create "happy" resolutions out of the subject material. Because leaving a mark is exclusive to the male characters in the novels, the theme is a very gendered convention that suggests that men's lives and deaths must be purposeful, heroic, and chivalrous, while women's lives and deaths can and should be passive, thereby reinforcing unreasonable expectations for both genders.

Augustus explains his struggle with accepting his unexceptional life and death quite explicitly in *The Fault in Our Stars*, telling Hazel, "If you don't live a life in service of a greater good, you've gotta at least die a death in service of a greater good, you know? And I fear that I won't get either a life or death that means anything" (168). He connects this feeling of meaninglessness quite directly to cancer and illness when he describes the glorious paintings in a museum, saying:

You would see a lot of paintings of dead people. You'd see Jesus on the cross, and you'd see a dude getting stabbed in the neck, and you'd see people dying at sea and in battle and a parade of martyrs. But Not. One. Single. Cancer. Kid. Nobody biting it from the plague or smallpox or yellow fever or whatever, because there is no glory in illness. There is no meaning to it. There is no honor in *dying of*' (Green 217).

Augustus's lament reveals that he not only wants his death to be glorious and meaningful, but also to be masculine. The deaths he lists, violent and often military deaths, were historically reserved for men and men only, while women tended to die on a deathbed of some sort, whether from childbirth, illness, or old age. He continues this masculine pursuit, reveling so much in repeatedly sacrificing his video game character to save Hazel's that Hazel contemplates faking choking so that he can save her and feel like a hero. Augustus's need to leave behind a legacy is so frustrating to Hazel that she snaps, "You're not going to be the first man on Mars, and you're not going to be an NBA star, and you're not going to hunt Nazis. I mean, look at yourself, Gus" (Green 241). In this speech, Hazel forces Augustus to face the reality of his diagnosis, that he cannot have a traditionally masculine death or even a stereotypically masculine life. Yet he still cannot accept this and spends his last days trying to make Hazel's biggest dream come true by contacting her favorite author for a sequel. When she finds out about it, Hazel is unsurprised: "It made sense, Gus leveraging his terminality to make my dreams come true. The sequel was a tiny thing to die for, but it was the biggest thing left at his disposal" (Green 304). Hazel also sticks a little French flag "in the ground at the foot of his grave. Maybe passersby would think he was a

member of the French Foreign Legion or some heroic mercenary” (Green 308) despite her previous critiques of his desire for such recognition.

Zac, too, worries about the mark that his life and death will leave on the world. After discovering that he has relapsed, he tells Mia, “You’re supposed to do something in this world, like have kids or grow a forest. I haven’t done anything like that. What’s the point of me, other than leaving behind a messed-up family?” (Betts 284). Mia expresses similar sentiments to Augustus’s when she tells Zac that “giving in is a *stupid* way to die” (Betts 283), implying that he should fight the cancer so that he can have a more glorious—or at least, less ‘stupid’—death and perhaps achieve some of the big moments of his life that he mentioned before dying heroically.

In the face of his diagnosis, Ben also questions the meaning of his life, asking Hey-Soos, the spiritual being he often dreams about,

What’s the purpose if I’m gonna be gone so quick? It’s not like anybody’s going to listen to me; I’m just going to be this small guy who had a good year on the football field. The good citizens of Trout aren’t really going to name a street after Malcolm X. My mother won’t get healed knowing me. My brother won’t all of a sudden learn to decipher defenses. (Crutcher 145)

Like Augustus and Zac, Ben worries that a premature death will leave his life meaningless. Ben is obsessed with “the idea I had to save every unsavable wretch I come across” (Crutcher 201), willing to sacrifice himself emotionally, just as Augustus wanted to sacrifice himself physically, for the good of others. Later, Ben becomes determined to get a street in his small, conservative

town named after Malcolm X, thinking, “Imagine if I could get the people of Trout, Idaho, to pay attention to the beauty of that larger world. Got legacy written all over it” (Crutcher 252). He imagines that, after his death, his message will still be spread through a senior time capsule or someone else who knows or learns about Ben’s cause, and that they will have enough time to truly enact the change he doesn’t have the time to make. He even writes in the graduation address his brother will read, “I’m hoping my death will cause enough guilt that you will name a street Malcolm X Avenue. Do it” (313). Ben is set on making his mark on the world, regardless of how and when it is achieved, but he’s more realistic about the mark he wants to leave. Rather than hoping to die gloriously or even have children, Ben acknowledges his limitations and so chooses legacies to leave behind that are achievable in his final year, and so avoids a crisis of purpose that Zac and Augustus do not. In the epilogue, we discover that a street was named after Malcolm X, and that Ben’s influence has encouraged his love interest, Dallas, and his brother, Cody, to move in together after graduation to raise the son Dallas had as a result of past sexual abuse. In this way, Cody follows the path his brother likely would have—or at least would have wanted to—and thus Ben’s legacy lives on through Cody. Just as Augustus and Adam (to be discussed shortly), and possibly Zac, get their legacy regardless of their own efforts, Ben leaves his mark on the world.

In *The Time Capsule*, the male protagonist’s legacy is very important to the narrative. The title alone indicates the centrality of legacy to the plot, and the concept of a time capsule is used to both introduce and end the novel. Unlike the other three novels, however, the protagonist, Adam, isn’t the one concerned with leaving a legacy; rather, his family takes on that concern for him. Because of this, it is unclear whether or not Adam’s legacy is attached to issues of gender and masculinity in the way it is in the other three novels. In *The Time Capsule*, Alexis

is preoccupied with making sure Adam's life meets its potential, whether through academic achievement or setting him up with the 'right' girl. Alexis decides to work hard in school and continue on the debate team so Adam can experience his senior year vicariously through her, in effect attempting to act as his proxy. She is determined to ensure that Adam walks with her at graduation, even tutoring him when he already has teachers working with him. After Adam's death, Alexis carries a rose in Adam's memory when she walks at graduation and keeps a time capsule of items that remind her of him that she will not only look over herself later on, but show to "my future friends and my future family (if I get married and have kids!)" (McDaniel 209). Her parents also set up a teddy bear foundation in Adam's name, inspired by the Christmas gifts he gave to the children on his hospital floor. That Adam's family feels compelled to create this legacy for Adam, especially given that Adam himself did not feel this need, is intriguing. On one hand, it could simply be that the family wants to remember Adam because they loved him. On the other hand, the family's need to make his relatively unremarkable life more significant could be construed as their attempt to cope with and compensate for Adam's diminished masculinity.

The preoccupation with leaving behind a legacy or having a meaningful life is limited to men in the stories. Hazel tells Augustus, "Your obsession with, like, dying for something or leaving behind some great sign of your heroism or whatever. It's just weird" (Green 169). She insists that not everyone "wants to lead an extraordinary life" and that "It's really mean of you to say that the only lives that matter are the ones that are lived for something or die for something" (Green 169). Despite having "never been anything but terminal" (Green 166), she never expresses any worry about her own legacy, and only wants to "minimize the casualties" of people hurt by her inevitable death. Augustus notices this trait in her and deeply admires it, telling Hazel's favorite author, "People will say it's sad that she leaves a lesser scar, that fewer

remember her, that she was loved deeply but not widely. But it's not sad, Van Houten. It's triumphant. It's heroic" (Green 312). Yet somehow he cannot adopt her attitude for himself, and writes in the same letter, "I want to leave a mark" (Green 311). Mia also never expresses any desire to sacrifice herself or do anything heroic, and specifically wants to live a normal, cancer-free life. Even though she tells Zac that giving in would be a stupid way to die, she herself wishes she had died instead of losing her leg and later contemplates suicide. These novels paint the desire to have an impact on the world or others as masculine, while passive feminine women accept fates without heroism and want nothing more than to blend in, thereby perpetuating an active male/passive female gender binary.

All four male protagonists also seem to believe that others' awareness of their illnesses will threaten their masculine identities, particularly illustrated by the need of all four characters to keep their diagnoses a secret for at least some portion of their stories. Though their motivations vary, being attractive to romantic partners, protecting others from getting hurt, and maintaining normalcy are major themes across the novels, and these motivations all work to maintain characters' masculinity, enabling the men to chivalrously protect their loved ones and be independent from medical and familial interventions. Augustus and Zac are both open about their diagnoses at first, as their positions keep them from hiding them. Augustus's introduction to Hazel is at a cancer support group for teens, and his prosthetic leg makes it challenging to deny his past. Similarly, Zac meets Mia in a hospital, where he is recovering from a bone marrow transfusion, and this situation combined with his appearance makes it impossible to hide his diagnosis from Mia. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, Zac doesn't seem to want to hide his diagnosis at all. His Facebook page is filled with messages of support from his classmates, and he's confused as to why Mia hasn't told her friends (Betts 54).

Despite these open and honest beginnings, however, both Augustus and Zac end up keeping their relapses hidden from their love interests and no one else, suggesting that they either believe illness will emasculate them and make them unattractive, or that they want to protect their love interests from getting hurt. Augustus finds out that his osteosarcoma is back well before his trip with Hazel to Amsterdam, but only tells her at the very end of it after some prodding from Hazel's mother. Hazel says, "I knew why he hadn't said anything, of course: the same reason I hadn't wanted him to see me in the ICU" (Green 214). The exact reason she hadn't wanted him to see her when she was in the ICU isn't stated, as Hazel seemed only to be worried about her appearance and trails off when suggesting that there is a larger reason: "I just don't want you to see... all this. I just want, like... It doesn't matter" (Green 110). Some possibilities could be that Hazel wanted to protect Augustus from the inevitable grief involved with being close to someone who is dying or that Hazel wanted to keep her 'sick' life separate from her 'healthy' life, a pattern that Elman noticed in her analysis of Lurlene McDaniel's Dawn Rochelle series (Elman 184-185). After confessing his relapse to Hazel, Augustus does express guilt over the idea that "I kind of conned you into believing you were falling in love with a healthy person" (Green 216), which suggests that Augustus kept the secret because he thought that health was attractive and loveable where illness was not, despite the fact that his appearance and ability hadn't changed at that point.

Zac finds out about his relapse after Mia leaves his house to complete her treatment, and pretends that he's in Disneyland with his family to keep her from contacting him. Betts doesn't offer an explanation for this change in behavior, but based on the motivations of other characters who hid their afflictions from friends and family, it's possible that he wanted to protect her from

getting hurt or that he wanted her to think he was still strong and ‘masculine,’ rather than weakened and feminized by illness.

In *Deadline*, Ben spends the vast majority of the novel keeping his diagnosis secret. His decision to do so not only enables him to live out the last year of his life with relative normalcy, but also gives him agency and control over his destiny that other characters don’t have as a result of their ages or the severity of their illnesses. Particularly for Ben, who wants nothing more than to help others, being someone others can depend on rather than an object of pity in need of constant aid is essential for the maintenance of his masculinity. The nature of his illness, presenting almost no symptoms besides fatigue over halfway through the story, is a strategic choice for Crutcher because it enables Ben to keep his secret, and also makes it possible for Ben to fulfill his masculine goals of becoming a football star, having sex, and fighting for change in his town. Initially, Ben chooses to forgo treatment for a few reasons, one of the most prominent being that he believes he has somehow always been destined to die young. He also skips treatment and keeps the secret because he doesn’t want to spend his last year “bald and puking” (Crutcher 10), break down his barely-functioning family, or make his mother feel guilty for being unable to care for him. Later, when he starts to wonder if he should tell his love interest, Dallas, he pushes the idea away, thinking, “I do *not* want people treating me like I’m dying. Nobody. I want to make this year my life: a regular life where people treat you regular” (Crutcher 128) and doubts whether she would still be in his life if he told her the truth (Crutcher 129). After he resolves to tell, he struggles to do so because he thinks “I can’t let them see me weak. That would ruin everything” (Crutcher 237). Despite consistently expressing his regret to readers, and Hey-Soos, that he didn’t reveal his diagnosis sooner, Ben also says at other points that he wouldn’t take it back. He tells his Coach that he wouldn’t have had the opportunity to

play football if he'd been open about his diagnosis, and that "Catching that pass from my brother was the single most thrilling event I've had, and I've had sex. I wouldn't give it up for anything" (Crutcher 249-250). For Ben, keeping his diagnosis secret is both a masculine choice in its agency and a strategy for establishing and developing his own masculine identity.

Adam, who's already been through two rounds of treatment in the past, doesn't tell his friends or girlfriend about his history of leukemia. Adam insists that the topic never came up and that "it's a turnoff [...] I figured I had one chance with her, and dumping my medical history on her didn't seem like a good way to start a relationship" (McDaniel 118). He skips his routine blood test, and later justifies it to his family members: "I was sick and tired of the testing and then of the waiting for the bad news [...] I wanted to go to school and have a normal life. I was tired of being micromanaged" (McDaniel 110-111). When he starts getting bruises and realizes that his leukemia is back for a third time, he doesn't tell anyone, explaining that, "I didn't want it to be happening all over again. So I pretended it wasn't [...]. A few more months of medical freedom was worth it to me" (McDaniel 109). Adam also tells his family that he lied because "You seemed to be relieved whenever I told you I felt fine and my checkups were good [...]. None of us wanted to go backward, so I told you what we all wanted to hear" (McDaniel 111). Adam's reasons for keeping his relapse a secret are different for each person he chose not to tell, and each of his motivations represents one of the three most common reasons characters in the other novels hid their diagnosis, as well: to maintain attractiveness, to live a normal life, and to protect others. In order to achieve these ideals, all four of the male characters delay or forgo treatment that could, at least in reality, save their lives, suggesting that it is masculine to suffer through illness and pain, even if it means sacrificing one's health or even one's life.

The two women in the novels who also suffer from terminal illness have significant differences in their willingness to tell others about their diagnoses. Hazel doesn't keep her illness secret—her physical appearance and oxygen tank make it difficult to conceal—and only keeps pain a secret because she assumes it's nothing and that she's just worrying too much. She worries about her parents' lives after she dies, but doesn't pretend to be well for them or make any sacrificial attempt to ensure that their future will be healthy and happy. Additionally, all of Hazel's old classmates know about her health issues, and she even stays in touch with one friend despite her feeling that they can't connect as well anymore. Mia, on the other hand, *does* try to keep her diagnosis secret from all of her friends, faking a volleyball injury to explain her crutches when she does see her friends. However, her mother and her boyfriend both know from the outset, so she's not attempting to keep them from getting hurt or initially concerned about illness making her unattractive to her boyfriend.

Mia doesn't discuss her motivations for hiding her diagnosis, but it seems that she just wants to be treated normally and to continue her life as it is. While this inclination is something the male protagonists share, her particular perspective on what is 'normal' is very different. She is furious at the prospect of wearing a wig to her school formal or attending in a wheelchair, and these superficial concerns seem to be the only things bothering her, reinforcing the Freudian connection between femininity and narcissism. The male characters' desire for normalcy, most explicitly stated in *Deadline* and *The Time Capsule* but made clear in various ways in all four novels, stands in stark opposition to this: unlike Mia's vain and silly reasoning, the men keep their illness secret because they don't want to be treated differently and because they want to have freedom from never-ending medical procedures. Regardless of whether Hazel's openness or Mia's secrecy is more representative of women in teen sick-lit, highly gendered assumptions

guide the trope of hiding a cancer diagnosis. Hazel's openness, compared with the male characters' secrecy, suggests that it is masculine to 'tough it out' through pain and illness for a variety of different reasons and feminine to allow medical procedures to dictate one's life and relationships. On the other hand, Mia's highly gendered secrecy, preoccupied with the school formal rather than the deeper, more rational concerns of male characters, perpetuates sexist assumptions that teenaged women are vain and irrational, an assumption that Betts reinforces when a nurse on the ward describes Mia as "moody. Won't eat breakfast. Won't eat anything. Won't fill out the blue card. Won't open the curtains. And how she speaks to her mother [...] See, boys, they have manners [...] Boys treat mothers with respect" (Betts 39), and Zac reminds us that his older sister, Bec, had been the same way as a teenager (Betts 66). Whether or not women choose to keep their diagnosis hidden, they are painted as feminine in relation to stubborn and tough men whose 'noble' and 'rational' motivations are acceptable to readers, and so these differences in disclosure of diagnosis perpetuate negative stereotypes of women and unhealthy ideals of 'noble' suffering in men.

In each of the novels, the losses of adult independence that go along with illness and its treatment are perhaps the most significant aspects of terminal illness for the male characters' sense of masculinity. As a result of the illness and treatment, the male characters feel emasculated and infantilized by their parents, their love interests, and themselves. After Hazel finds that Augustus wet the bed, he tells her that he's "developing a deeper appreciation of the word *mortified*" (Green 240) and notices shortly thereafter that Hazel calls him Gus when "You used [...] to call me Augustus" (Green 240), suggesting that, in Hazel's eyes, Augustus embodies a more childish—and thus emasculated—version of himself as his illness worsens. His older sisters infantilize him even more explicitly: "Julie was sitting on the edge of the bed,

talking to a sleeping Gus in precisely the same voice that one would use to tell an infant he was adorable, saying, ‘Oh, Gussy Gussy, our little Gussy Gussy.’ Our Gussy? Had they acquired him?” (Green 250). As he becomes too ill to function independently, he drives to a gas station to buy his own cigarettes, wanting “to do it myself. Do one little thing myself” (Green 244). Hazel describes him as “this desperate humiliated creature sitting there beneath me [...] a pitiful boy who desperately wanted not to be pitiful, screaming and crying” (Green 245). After these events humiliate and emasculate him, at least in his opinion, he points at nothing and tells Hazel, “It’s my last shred of dignity. It’s very small” (Green 248).

The effects of leukemia and treatment on Zac’s feelings of masculine independence are perhaps the most pronounced because of the severity of his illness. He feels patronized by the constant monitoring the hospital and especially his mother keep him under. He describes his regression back to a level before toilet training because his mother would witness his bowel movements: “she often stayed in the room when the nurses cleaned me up or washed me down, even if she was pretending to do crosswords. I’d become a baby all over again, but with testosterone and pubic hair and nurses sponging me in shifts” (Betts 18). Later, when he catches a cold that his immune system struggles to fight, he calls it “a stupid freaking cold that I’m too pathetic to fight on my own” (72-73).

His treatment, a bone marrow graft, also feminizes him. His friends joke that his bone marrow, only known to have originated in Germany, came from a “pretzel-baking, beer-swilling, braid-swinging Fräulein from Bavaria with massive *die Brust*” (Betts 29), and when Mia finds out about it, she calls him Helga for the first half of the novel despite Zac’s constant protests. Yet despite playing into the Helga joke with his friends, Zac really does worry about his masculine image. He asks, “Could it be that my constant proximity to females—my mother, the

predominantly female staff, possibly even my bone marrow—has seriously compromised my Y chromosomes?” (Betts 56). When his mother wants him to take up knitting while he’s in isolation, he’s so concerned with his masculinity that he threatens “to use one to stab myself in the eye. I’d rather watch repeats of *Glee* [a recent show about choral and theatrical music popularly considered feminine and suspected by a few groups to be “Gay Teen Propaganda,” according to Skarda’s *Time* article] than take up knitting. Besides, I need to pay more attention to my image” (Betts 61). Even when Zac is out of the hospital, he’s confined by a long list of health restrictions. He can’t help his father and brother pick olives on the family farm, and is irritated that a French girl gets to pick instead of him, asking “You know what that does for my ego?” (Betts 105). Instead of picking olives with the men in his family, he has to feed animals with a bottle, placing him in a feminine position as the goat kids “pull so hard at the teats I have to hold my ground” (119). He’s convinced that the girls at school, and even a fox living near their yard, can ‘smell’ his illness: “not death, but weakness. Vulnerability. I wonder if she senses I’m not as strong as I should be, caught in limbo between sickness and health. ACHTUNG. FRAGILE” (121). Even things as simple as his hair growing back orange, a feminizing trait in men, and having to wear pink gloves mark him as feminized by cancer, a mark that he is uniquely aware of in comparison to the men in the other novels.

Both *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Zac and Mia* very realistically portray the emasculation that goes along with the effects of cancer and its treatment, particularly in relation to losses of independence. It is this realistic portrayal that Belcher praises as engaging “consistently with abjection when depicting illness, death, and sexual relationships” and thus working “to contest the stereotypical portrayal of the cancerous, female body as irrevocably abject” (61). The realistic portrayal does more than just contest stereotypical portrayals of sick women; it also

contests stereotypical portrayals of men as strong, stoic, and brave in the face of terminal illness, and thus demonstrates the feminizing realities of cancer on young men. However, neither text problematizes the cultural norms and gender expectations that cause such severe gender crises in the male characters. Rather, *The Fault in Our Stars* gives Augustus a number of scenes immediately before his death that reestablish his masculinity and sense of humor without bringing up any severely feminizing effects of illness, while *Zac and Mia* encourages readers to sympathize with Zac's frustration that he cannot participate in his ordinary masculine activities and approve of his small rebellions against the feminizing rules for bone marrow transplant recipients. For the majority of the novel, Zac is out of treatment and, though his activities are limited, he is able to actively watch out for Mia, build his sister a crib, and drive across the country to take Mia home.

Adam struggles with his masculinity much less consciously than Augustus or Zac do—or at least, his struggles go undocumented because the story is told in the third person and focalization is limited to Alexis's point of view. Nonetheless, the effects of cancer on his masculine identity are indirectly explored. At the start of the novel, the narrator describes him as “the shyer of the two, and Alexis usually felt as if she was either pushing him or dragging him to do something. But then, Adam's life had been a whole lot more difficult than hers” (McDaniel 4). He looks back on his past with cancer and tells Alexis that “Nobody wanted me when I was on chemo. Nobody” (McDaniel 83). Adam's experiences with cancer have made him shyer and given him greater appreciation of the influence of health on his sexual attractiveness. Neither of these traits are depicted as negative, however; if anything, they make Adam a more sympathetic character as readers, like Alexis, want him to be happy to offset his hardships. Later, when Adam is in the hospital, he takes on an almost maternal role, taking one particular boy under his wing

and helping him through his recovery and giving each of the children on his floor a teddy bear. This, too, is depicted as positive and the narrative does not suggest that this activity makes him feminine. On one hand, this can be interpreted as allowing for a masculinity more in touch with emotions and femininity, but on the other, Adam's kindness could also be an effect of the "sanitization" of death that Belcher decries in her dissertation. Rather than depicting the realistic effects of cancer and its treatment, and the feelings of emasculation that most male cancer patients experience because of it, McDaniel simply describes the least shocking effects and then pushes them from readers' minds with his positive attitude, masculine stoicism, and almost emotionless response to his impending death.

Unlike *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Zac and Mia*, and, on some level, *The Time Capsule*, *Deadline* portrays almost no losses to masculinity as a result of Ben's cancer diagnosis. This happens, in part, because Ben forgoes emasculating treatment and experiences almost no effects of his illness until very late in the novel. He maintains his masculine identity from before the diagnosis, and even increases it as a result of his "nothing to lose" mentality, which gives him the masculine confidence to try out for football and ask out the girl of his dreams. Significantly, though, Ben starts the novel out with an already diminished masculinity because of his small stature. He's "approximately three quarters" his younger brother Cody's size (Crutcher 12). In fact, his younger brother is consistently depicted as the more masculine of the two. Despite being older, Ben's classmates call him "Little Wolf" and Cody calls him "little big bro" (Crutcher 53). Ben had to get "the talk" from Cody (Crutcher 131) His love interest, Dallas Suzuki, is much more masculine in appearance than he is; Ben describes her as:

tall – listed 5’11” in the volleyball program – and you can’t even tell if she’s beautiful because she doesn’t look like any girl you’ve ever seen. [...] Her muscular thighs and calves give her hops so major she blocks out the sun if you’re on the other side of the net, and the width of her shoulders makes her appear to be dangling from a wire hanger. There’s not one part of Dallas Suzuki’s face or body that is in any way Miss World... (Crutcher 47)

The bravery that Ben gains from his diagnosis gives him the courage to ask Dallas out, but he was interested in her before cancer had the opportunity to feminize him, and thus make him less likely to get a more feminine and traditionally beautiful girl. The gender deviance in *Deadline*, then, is separated from the cancer diagnosis, and illness seems to do very little to feminize Ben, reinforcing the highly unrealistic idea that men can suffer through cancer and maintain normative masculinity (and even excel in sports and romantic pursuits) and that forgoing treatment is a rational way to do so.

Just as appearance was very important to the subjects of sociological research, the value of looks is emphasized for ill characters in all four of the novels. While both men and women value their appearances and the masculinity or femininity their appearances respectively reflect, preoccupation with appearances is traditionally considered a feminine trait. In this way, the novels’ depictions of male characters’ concerns with their looks have the potential to push back against gender boundaries by showing these insecurities without suggesting that they are unreasonable or feminine. Green and Crutcher fail to successfully challenge these gender roles, however, while Betts and McDaniel depict their male protagonists’ concerns in ways that push back against masculine expectations. Nonetheless, these challenges are at least somewhat

undermined by descriptions of the men's appearances when they are not receiving treatment. All of the men but Ben are firmly established as having features and bodies that are heteronormatively attractive. Hazel's friend Kaitlyn finds Augustus very attractive, and tells her that she would "ride that one-legged pony all the way around the corral" (Green 94). Mia finds Zac to be "better-looking than I'd thought" (Betts 125) when she sees him for the first time after leaving the hospital. Adam is so attractive that a classmate that they had had in the first grade tells Alexis that she "had the worst crush on your brother and wanted him to notice me. He's still cute" (McDaniel 6). Alexis's best friend Tessa has also "had a crush on Adam for years" (McDaniel 24).

The men's attractiveness is established so conspicuously because later challenges to their looks arise with the onset of illness and treatment, which challenge their masculinity. Augustus and Ben cope with the changes in ways that strongly reinforce their masculinity, seeming to care very little about their looks. Augustus insists that "seventeen-year-old guys with one leg" are universally virgins (Green 119). Later, when he and Hazel see each other naked for the first time, he is embarrassed of his amputated leg, but Hazel quickly reassures him that it doesn't bother her, telling him to "get over yourself" (Green 206). Otherwise, he doesn't express much concern about his own appearance. Once his treatment begins, Hazel is seemingly the only one who notices that he is "no longer the muscular, gorgeous boy who stared at me in support group" (Green 234), and Augustus even banters with Hazel about his good looks toward the end of his life when his health is at its worst. Although Ben was never explicitly established as good looking in Crutcher's novel, it's likely because Ben doesn't receive treatment and therefore hardly experiences any changes to his appearance. He doesn't need a hyper-masculine appearance to compensate for the effects of his illness, because it only affects his looks by

making him thinner than he used to be. He says, “I was a little shit before, but now, little shits call me a little shit. My clothes hang on me” (Crutcher 303), he expresses very little distress about these changes and, if he does experience any, he copes with it through humor.

Adam and Zac, on the other hand, are heavily impacted by the changes to their appearances. Adam’s girlfriend breaks up with him because she’s so uncomfortable with his sickness, but Adam attributes it more to his looks than to his illness. He criticizes his looks very harshly, saying, “I’m a freak. No hair. Sores all over my body from the drugs. I look like a refugee in my clothes. I’m disgusting. No girl wants to be stuck with a guy like me” (McDaniel 149). This is a stark contrast to the flippant ways that Augustus and Ben dealt with their insecurities.

Zac, likewise, is preoccupied with his appearance, particularly as it influences his attractiveness to Mia. He is absolutely horrified with his appearance after the bone marrow transplant, comparing his head to a “giant Rice Krispy” (Betts 31) and telling readers that the only accurate description came from his older brother, who calls him “scrotum-face” (Betts 32). He believes Mia’s choice to ignore his note is justified, because “Why would someone like her bother communicating with a bald Jabba the Hutt like me?” (Betts 32). Though the nurses on the ward and most of Zac’s Facebook friends reassure him that he’s still good-looking, Mia, like Zac’s brother, is cruel, “yelling” at Zac in a Facebook message, “U THINK I WANT TO GO BALD AND UGLY? LIKE U?” (Betts 85). Though Zac uses the masculine technique of humor to deal with the changes to his appearance, the repeated discussion of his insecurities does push back somewhat against masculine expectations that he shouldn’t care about his looks. Once Zac has largely recovered, however, his appearance improves drastically. After he leaves the hospital,

he is described as attractive, particularly through Mia's eyes, and he stops expressing insecurities about his looks to readers altogether.

The ill women in the novels care about their appearances on very different levels from each other, with Hazel expressing only a few vague insecurities, seemingly unrelated to the effect of her treatment, and Mia constantly obsessing about her looks after her treatment, exaggerating the "unattractive" aspects of her appearance to the point of delusion. When Augustus tells Hazel she's beautiful, she starts telling him "I'm not beau—" (Green 16), and she considers telling her friend about Augustus because "I knew it would surprise and amaze her that anyone as disheveled and awkward and stunted as me could even briefly win the affections of a boy" (Green 43). Upon discovering that Augustus waited outside the ICU when she was in the hospital for a brief time, Hazel's first reaction is to ask, "He hasn't seen me like this, has he?" (Green 108). She worries about the clothes she wears, particularly concerned when she wears a dress that "offered the most in the way of my rib cage and collarbone that Augustus had seen. It wasn't obscene or anything, but it was as close as I ever got to showing some skin" (Green 160) and finds herself worrying about her unmatching underwear when she and Augustus have sex. Relative to Augustus, Hazel has very little confidence in her appearance, but her worries are typically unrelated to illness and rather seem to be part of her personality.

Mia is much more preoccupied with her appearance, horrified that her hair is falling out and that she will have to wear a wig and use a wheelchair at her formal. When her boyfriend breaks up with her after she gets out of the hospital, she assumes it's because he doesn't think she's pretty anymore and tries to arouse him so she'll have "proof that I'm still sexy, that I can still make him moan" (103). Losing her leg sends her into a spiral of insecurity, and she doesn't believe any of the compliments Zac gives her, telling her she's beautiful, because he doesn't try

to kiss her or grab at her. She says, "I'm a complete idiot. All the compliments in the world mean nothing if he doesn't want to act on them. Zac is just a nice guy trying to make me feel better. And I'm a fucking fool for believing him" (Betts 184). She believes that menstruation is wasted on her because "no one will ever want to have sex with what's left of me. No one could ever love this. My whole life I've only ever been the pretty one—it's all I needed to be. But what am I now...? Who could look at me with anything but disgust?" (Betts 185). Mia adds, "Without my looks, what's left? I'm not smart, or kind, or talented, or creative, or funny or brave. I'm nothing" (Betts 185). Her distress is strongly reminiscent of Lurlene McDaniel's character Dawn Rochelle. Elman cites Dawn's concerns:

Dawn is often seen applying makeup, contemplating her appearance and agonizing over her ill body's undesirability to boys. When she begins chemotherapy, she "wishes Jake had kissed her" because now "that she had cancer, he probably never would" because chemotherapy "would make her ugly and sick" and "no one would ever want to kiss her as long as she lived" ("Six Months," 31). (Elman 181)

The catastrophic reasoning Mia and characters in McDaniel's archetypal cancer novels employ cast women as stereotypes, unable to think beyond their looks. For Mia, beauty is her entire identity, and her confidence in her appearance hinges on men's attraction to her. All of the characters diagnosed with cancer in these novels, both male and female, worry about their appearances and tend to do so most consciously when thinking about their romantic relationships. But the level on which the changes affect Mia stands out as irrational and even

obsessive, particularly when juxtaposed with Zac's use of humor and positivity to cope with his own insecurities, and therefore strongly reinforces stereotypes of women as vain, overemotional, and valued only for their looks. Moreover, the standards that characters of both genders are held to go unquestioned in all three novels that explore the effects of illness on appearance, reinforcing the idea that people should be good-looking regardless of their health.

In the romantic relationships between the male and female protagonists of each novel, another pattern appears. The man, if feminized by cancer, always chooses a romantic interest who is weakened or wounded in some way to compensate for his lost masculinity. For Augustus and Zac, the weakness is obvious. Hazel and Mia's cancer diagnoses even the playing field so that, despite their own cancer diagnoses, the men are still masculine in relation to them. Mia's prognosis is much better than Zac's, and she feminizes him consistently by calling him Helga, but ultimately Zac exhibits awareness of her inability to cope and her irrationality. He wields power over her by preventing her from running away, withholding sexual behavior from her, and by playing the voice of reason. By the end of the novel, Mia is no longer the rude girl she was at the start, and she pines after Zac for the remainder of the story until they are reunited. When both Augustus and Zac relapse, their masculinity is reinforced with athleticism and chivalry. Hazel notes that Augustus pops wheelies with his wheelchair because he's "still athletic, in spite of it all, blessed with balance and quick reflexes that even the abundant narcotics could not fully mask" (Green 235), and he spends his last days in pursuit of a sequel for Hazel. Similarly, Zac, who hasn't yet experienced the feminizing effects of more treatment at the end of the novel, uses his Make-A-Wish grant to buy Mia a high-end prosthetic because "What wouldn't I do to keep the smile on her face? To hear that laugh, to have her fight with me, not against me" (Betts 289).

The men compensate for their emasculation through small displays of athleticism and chivalrous gestures that place their love interests in a position of something just short of dependence.

In *The Time Capsule*, Adam's girlfriend breaks up with him shortly after finding out about his diagnosis, and Adam knows that his illness is to blame. In addition to the effects cancer has had on his appearance, he knows that he can no longer be the masculine boyfriend: "What girl wants a boyfriend who can't take her out on dates? Or see her at school? Or even buy her a hamburger?" (McDaniel 149). Adam knows that he is no longer masculine enough for Kelly, and doesn't blame her for breaking up with him despite her immensely shallow reasoning. Adam's newly single status, however, opens up an opportunity for Alexis's best friend, Tessa, to spend more time with him. Alexis admits that Tessa "wasn't gorgeous" (McDaniel 24), and she feels self-conscious in a bathing suit, presumably because, as she tells Alexis, "I couldn't squeeze into one of [Kelly's] even if I greased myself all over with olive oil" (McDaniel 64). Tessa is completely unperturbed by his sickness and is one of the only people who visits him. Shortly before his death, Adam admits, "I should have picked her instead of Kelly" (189). Because cancer has feminized Adam, Tessa suddenly has a chance with him despite her lack of conventional attractiveness.

The only exception to this rule is Ben, because his cancer does not feminize him and, if anything, gives him an opportunity to establish a more masculine identity than he had in the past. Nonetheless, he is much smaller and thinner than Dallas, who is described in very masculine terms; so, in order to balance out the dynamic and make Dallas's interest in Ben more acceptable, Crutcher gives her a tragic backstory of childhood sexual abuse and a resulting son. Dallas is thereby feminized as a passive victim, and as a mother, whose wounds and role make

her vulnerable and cast her as feminine, especially in relation to Ben's recent developments of confidence and unexpected athletic ability.

### Conclusion

In many ways, the four novels discussed here challenge gender boundaries. *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Zac and Mia* depict, in great detail, the effects of treatment and losses of independence that go along with a cancer diagnosis without "sanitizing" them in an effort to preserve the characters' masculinity. *Zac and Mia* and *Deadline* play with the gender roles within romantic relationships by giving female love interests the power to, at least temporarily, feminize the men. All of the men in the novels experience some amount of insecurity about their appearances, even worrying about it to a stereotypically feminine extent without any suggestion that the worries are feminine or in any way inappropriate. Yet ultimately, heteronormative gender roles are reinforced: when not in treatment, the men are described as heteronormatively attractive and athletic; stoicism and bravery in the face of trauma is upheld as a realistic ideal; and stereotypes of women are perpetuated in a variety of ways. The unrealistic standards of masculinity for the men in these novels go unchallenged, and readers may thus be held to many of these ideals and will hold others to the same expectations. While teen sick-lit has certainly come a long way in its depictions of gender ideals from the pre-2000 novels Elman and Belcher analyze, the genre has a long way yet to go in challenging readers' gender ideals and cultural norms.

## Chapter 2

### **Freak, Loner, Revolutionary: Masculinity and Gender Roles in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction with Gay Protagonists**

In recent years, young adult novels with LGBTQ<sup>9</sup> themes have exploded in popularity. In *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins note the exponential growth of LGBTQ young adult novels since 1969: “The annual rate of publication of novels with GLBTQ content has grown steadily from one per year in the 1970s to four in the 1980s to seven in the 1990s to the current [2004] rate of thirteen per year (128). Author and diversity researcher Malinda Lo found that a total of 94 YA books with LGBTQ content were published in 2013 alone, with 29 of the titles published by mainstream publishers. In 2014, Lo found that mainstream publishers published 47 titles with LGBTQ content – “a 59% increase from 2013” (“2014 LGBT YA by the Numbers”). In fact, with the exception of a small dip at the time of the 2008 economic recession, in fact, Lo found that the number of LGBTQ-themed YA novels continues to rise (see figure 1).

As more and more LGBTQ YA novels are published, critical discourse on the genre also continues to grow, but discussions of gender representations are limited, at least in the work on cisgender gay male characters. For example, scholars like Cart and Jenkins, Malinda Lo, and Corrine M. Wickens have performed numerous surveys of the genre as a whole, focusing on such issues as diversity, positive portrayals of queer characters, and combating homophobia.

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<sup>9</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. Cart and Jenkins use the abbreviation GLBTQ because “the human rights movement on behalf of GLBTQ people... was originally referred to as the gay rights or gay liberation movement” (xv). However, ‘LGBTQ’ is the most prominent abbreviation for the community today and gives women visibility and recognition. In this paper, I use LGBTQ unless directly quoting a source that uses a different abbreviation.

Jenkins’s 1997 article “From Queer to Gay and Back Again” and her 2004 collaboration with Cart both seek to delineate trends in LGBTQ portrayals and inclusion through a three-category

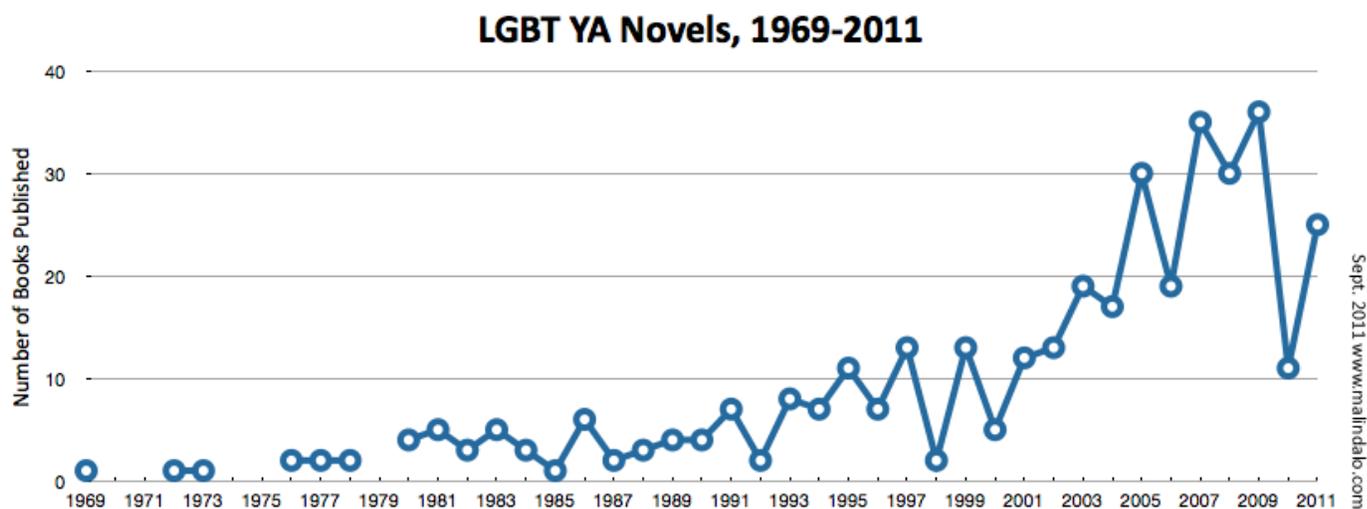


Figure 1. Malinda Lo’s 2011 findings illustrate the exponential increase in the number of YA novels with LGBTQ content published per year. Note that the graph does not include data past 2011. In 2013, the total number of LGBTQ-themed YA novels was 94, more than double the peak value here (approximately 36). Source: Malinda Lo, “I have numbers! Stats on LGBT Young Adult Books – Updated 9/15/11”; *Malindalo.com*; 15 September 2011; Web, 9 July 2015.

model. The categories<sup>10</sup> and various analyses essentially focus on queer characters’ relative three-dimensionality (i.e., whether a queer character is highly stereotypical, used as a plot device,

<sup>10</sup> Cart and Jenkins use a model based on Rudine Sims Bishop’s three-part model for the inclusion of African American characters in children’s fiction. Cart and Jenkins used this model to create their own three categories for LGBTQ inclusion: (1) “Homosexual Visibility,” where a queer character’s identity is discovered in the story and the response to this discovery is a major aspect of the story’s plot, (2) “Gay Assimilation,” which includes characters “who ‘just happen

has a didactic or clichéd storyline, etc.). While their findings offer important contexts for understanding the progression of LGBTQ characters in YA novels and give foundational insight into the tropes of the genre, very little, if anything, is mentioned about characters' gender presentations or gendered expectations. Wickens's 2007 dissertation, "Queering Young Adult Literature: Examining Sexual Minorities in Contemporary Realistic Fiction Between 2000-2005" performs a similar analysis, though of a much smaller number of books from a narrower window of time. In the dissertation, Wickens examines selected novels for representations of homophobia, support systems, identity development (in the context only of gay/lesbian identity exclusive of gender identity), and authorial voices. Later, in her 2011 article "Codes, Silences, And Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions About Gender And Sexuality In Contemporary LGBTQ Young Adult Literature," Wickens examines various novels from the genre to determine to what extent they successfully combat homophobic discourses in contemporary society. These literature surveys are clearly significant in many ways, not least of which is their interrogation of the seemingly inherent challenges to homophobia and stereotypes of homosexuality—however, notably missing from all of them is any examination of characters' gender development.

Only a few critics have examined particular novels in-depth, namely Terence Beck and Thomas Crisp. In his article "Conceptions of Sexuality and Coming Out in Three Young Adult Novels: *Hero*, *Sprout*, and *In Mike We Trust*, Beck looks to three recent novels featuring gay male protagonists and analyzes their identity and coming-out narratives. Beck argues that the characters are positive representations of gay individuals, but that the messages the novels convey—that coming out is essential to a character's happiness and secrecy inherently harmful,

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to be gay" (Cart and Jenkins xx), and (3) "Queer Consciousness/Community," stories that show LGBTQ characters in their own communities and their families of choice or origin.

and that sexuality exists in a gay-straight binary—are potentially negative. The article, like the many literature reviews preceding it, fails to address concerns of gender identity, specifically masculinity. In fact, Crisp’s article “The Trouble with *Rainbow Boys*,” is the only piece in my literature review to discuss roles and identities in any detail. In the article, Crisp problematizes the widely lauded *Rainbow Boys* series, which started in 2001. He argues that the book relies on heteronormative stereotypes within gay relationships, privileges masculinity, and perpetuates a masculine ability to defend oneself with aggression and violence. However, Crisp’s findings, while a significant contribution to the critical work on LGBTQ YA novels as an examination of the gender expectations put forth by an important text in the genre, are limited to just one series from over a decade ago.

These significant gaps in the current critical literature, along with the genre’s enormous growth, demand an analysis of gender roles in the gay-themed young adult novels published in the interim, from 2001 to the present, to determine whether or not contemporary gender roles, with a particular focus on standards of masculinity, are challenged or reinforced in this expanding genre. To do so, I examined a total of nine novels written in 2001 or later that feature one or more gay male main characters. I selected these primary texts based on critical acclaim (particularly seeking out winners of Lambda Literary Awards and Stonewall Awards), the presence of critical work on them, and publication date, selecting novels written between 2001 and 2014 but also attempting to find novels from a variety of years within this range so as to make the sample more representative. I began with Cart and Jenkins’s recommendations of *Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez (2001) and *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan (2003) as two groundbreaking texts. I selected *Absolutely, Positively Not* by David LaRochelle (2005) based on its publication date and online recommendations. *Hero* by Perry Moore (2007) and *Sprout* by

Dale Peck (2009) were both discussed in Beck's critical article, and also represent an important time period where LGBTQ novel publication was at its pre-recession peak. Rounding out this time period is also *What They Always Tell Us* by Martin Wilson (2008), a finalist for the 2009 Lambda Literary Award. Next are two Stonewall Award-winning novels from 2012, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, which won a large number of other accolades, and *Gone, Gone, Gone* by Hannah Moskowitz. Finally, I selected *I'll Give You the Sun* by Jandy Nelson (2014), winner of the Stonewall and Printz awards, for the most recent gay-themed YA novel. In these nine novels, gender representations, particularly representations of gay male characters' gender expressions and identities, vary greatly. The majority of protagonists have almost neutral gender identities, with a relatively balanced set of feminine and masculine traits that pushes against traditional gender boundaries. However, the absence of positive representations of effeminate<sup>11</sup> gay men and the depictions of protagonists' relationships, both romantic and not, perpetuate negative expectations for masculinity.

### **Homophobia and Effeminophobia: The Integration of Heteronormative Expectations in the Gay Community**

In the gay community, men experience a great deal of pressure to exhibit heteronormative masculinity, both in appearance and in behavior. The pressure to 'act straight' is so strong that "No femmes, no fats, and no Asians" is a common quote found in many gay personal ads, both

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<sup>11</sup> The term 'effeminate' can have derogatory connotations in that it calls a male's masculinity and manhood into question and has historically been used as a negative descriptor. The word hasn't been reclaimed as a positive descriptor within the gay community, but the word isn't popularly considered offensive. With an understanding of its potentially negative implications, I use the word 'effeminate' because it refers exclusively to femininity in men and is therefore more specific than "feminine," which can characterize men or women. It also carries these historically negative connotations that should, in my opinion, be questioned. Finally, it highlights the cultural prominence of effeminophobia.

in print and in cyberspace” (Han 97). In the 2009 documentary *The Butch Factor*, Professor Don Romesburg, says, “many people expect to come out into the gay community and find their gender expression, whatever it is, embraced and accepted. And often they find just the contrary, that there’s this mandate to be more masculine.” The divide between masculine and feminine is such that, according to Peter Nardi, some gay leaders believe that effeminate gay men are damaging the public perception of homosexuality and sabotaging the fight for equal rights through their feminine behavior (Nardi 4). This rejection of effeminate subsets of the gay population constitutes ‘effeminophobia,’ a term first coined by queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to denote the prevalent fear and hatred of effeminacy in men (Annes and Redlin 278-279). Yet men who do idealize and embody this masculinity are likely to experience significant negative effects, as well. Sociologist Jay Clarkson performed a survey of masculinity on a gay website called “StraightActing.com.” In his article, he states:

Homosexuals who adopt images of masculinity, conveying their desire for power and their belief in its beauty, are in fact eroticizing the very values of straight society that have tyrannized their own lives. . . . the suppression of denial of the moral issue in their choice is far more damaging. The perversity of imitating their oppressors guarantees that such blindness will work itself out as self-contempt.

(204)

Similarly, Sánchez and Vilain cite a 2009 study by Hamilton and Mahalik that found that conformity to masculine norms among gay men was positively correlated with internalized homophobia (112), a finding that they confirmed in their own 2012 study. They determined that

“the more preoccupied with their masculinity and the more negative they felt towards effeminate gay men, the more our men experienced some degree of negative feelings about being gay” (116).

When it comes to LGBTQ YA literature, then, the gender representations put in place for gay men are significant, as they have the potential to reinforce and perpetuate negativity toward effeminacy and privilege unrealistic and harmful ideals of masculinity. As Crisp demonstrates, *Rainbow Boys* fails to effectively question and even perpetuates these standards, and while many recent novels push back against gender boundaries in numerous ways, an overall privileging of masculinity and rejection of effeminacy persists in the genre.

### **The Balanced<sup>12</sup> Gender Identity: Alternative Masculinities in Young Adult Novels and the Potential for Challenges to Gender Norms**

Despite the genre’s overall gender role reinforcement, many of the novels do push back against gender boundaries through their characterization of protagonists. One of the greatest overarching trends surrounding masculine identity development in the texts examined is in the characterization of protagonists as embodying a gender expression that balances stereotypically feminine and masculine traits. While all of the gay main characters identify as cisgender men, these characters provide some alternative masculinities with which readers can potentially identify. The representations of these alternative masculinities vary somewhat between novels, but the characters share many of the same traits: they often feel different from their peers,

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<sup>12</sup> The term ‘balanced’ is used to describe the relatively common use of both feminine and masculine traits in gay protagonists. Though the proportion of masculine and feminine traits are often imbalanced, with a bias toward masculine characteristics, the term is the most accurate available to describe these alternative masculinities.

especially men; they may identify as emotional and are sometimes characterized with symptoms typical of depression; and they have few, if any, friends and are usually shy or outcast by their peers in some way. Arguably, ten of the twelve gay protagonists embody some or all aspects of these alternative masculinities. In many ways, these characters challenge gender boundaries through their positive representation of men embodying feminine traits.

A vast majority of protagonists explicitly cast themselves as different from other teenage boys, typically elaborating on this claim with examples of the traditionally masculine behaviors other men engage in, including discussions of heterosexual desire and activity, to which the protagonist can't relate to. Sociologist CJ Pascoe explains the norms of primarily male spaces like weight rooms and locker rooms in her book *Dude, You're a Fag*: "heterosexual innuendoes, sexual bravado, and sexual one-upmanship permeated these [...] spaces [...] In these sorts of interactions and gendered spaces, masculinity, in spite of boys' talk about the gay boys' ability to be masculine... is assumed to be synonymous with heterosexuality" (85). Ari in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* describes the masculine discourses in these spaces and emphasizes the ways he doesn't fit in: he doesn't like showering with other guys at the local pool because "some guys liked to talk a lot, like it was a normal thing to be in the shower with a bunch of guys and talking about a teacher you hated or the last movie you saw or the girl you wanted to do something with. Not me, I didn't have anything to say. Guys in the shower. Not my thing" (Sáenz 15). Ari elaborates on his distaste for masculine conversation after he overhears lifeguards making sexual comments about women. Ari tells readers, "guys really made me uncomfortable [...]. I just didn't belong. I think it embarrassed the hell out of me that I was a guy. And it really depressed me because there was the distinct possibility that I was going to grow up and be like one of those assholes" (Sáenz 16). In David LaRochelle's *Absolutely*,

*Positively Not*, Steven reflects that he had never been any good at sports and when he was in Boy Scouts, he “quietly worked on my craft project while the other boys ran around the Dalton living room throwing couch cushions at their Chihuahua” (LaRochelle 48). In his attempt to become straight, Steven tries to befriend the hockey players at his school. They mostly ignore him, and shortly after he throws up from watching one of them drink a disgusting mixture the group made, he is ostracized.

Some characters are also bullied by more stereotypically masculine jocks at school, showing that the characters don’t just isolate themselves, but are ostracized by their heteronormatively masculine peers. The implication that heteronormative masculinity is necessarily tied with homophobia serves either to pathologize extreme masculinity or to provide unhealthy expectations for straight masculinity, depending on each novel’s treatment of bullying. In the case of *I’ll Give You the Sun*, Noah pathologizes heteronormative masculinity and questions mainstream norms, thereby both directly and indirectly challenging dominant gender expectations. At the start of the novel, two athletes rip up Noah’s drawings, calling him names and mimicking him. Noah regards them as the “reigning neighborhood sociopaths” (1), “hippopotamus” (2), and “Viking” (5) and refers to their “Neanderthal minds” (6). Noah uses negative images of hypermasculinity to position the bullies’ masculinity as unappealing and ridiculous, making his relative femininity preferable to readers. Noah also frames his rejection of “normal” behavior and popularity by showing disgust for normalcy and considering himself a “revolutionary” for fighting back against the dominant cultural expectations set for him. Alex in *What They Always Tell Us*, on the other hand, does not deflect bullying by problematizing the bullies’ excessive masculinity or questioning the standards to which his peers hold him. Rather, he is outcast when his friends start excluding him and teasing him because, readers infer, his

friends suspect that he's gay, and rather than identifying this as homophobia or bullying, Alex becomes so depressed that he attempts suicide at a party, leading to even greater alienation than he had experienced previously. In general, characters both isolate themselves from others because of their differences and difficulty relating to masculine norms and are isolated by their more traditionally masculine peers.

These characters with balanced gender expressions may also have some interests or traits that are traditionally viewed as feminine, such as increased emotionality (which some characters embrace with some embarrassment and others deny and try to control) and greater talent in such pursuits as art or writing than in the more stereotypically masculine areas of math and science. Craig admits that he cries "like three times a day, so it's the opposite of a big deal" (Moskowitz 29) and Noah exhibits constant emotional ups and downs: his eyes well up with tears after a bully notices his erection during a fight, he's constantly anxious and embarrassed in his interactions with just about everyone, and he cries with happiness upon witnessing a gay couple kissing. The characters also demonstrate feminine interests, especially in comparison to their love interests. Noah in *I'll Give You the Sun* loves drawing so much he thinks about portraits he could draw constantly and can't wait to show his love interest, Brian, the portrait he drew of him, while athletic, "normal" Brian is obsessed with astronomy and finding fallen meteors. In *What They Always Tell Us*, Alex says that his trigonometry and chemistry midterms will be tough and that he hates math and science, while the more traditionally masculine Nathen replies, "See, that's what I love. It all makes sense to me" (Wilson 74). None of these traits are so feminine as to be unacceptable (i.e., the characters aren't preoccupied with fashion or pop culture, they don't wear makeup or dress in women's clothing, and they aren't depicted as 'sassy' or 'queens'), but they do characterize the protagonists as at least somewhat feminized relative to other characters.

The protagonists also may exhibit a rejection of heteronormatively masculine activities and traits, though such expressions as a disinterest in watching sports and an avoidance of physical confrontations. While these tendencies don't seem to be out of an ethical objection to violence (characters typically don't fight back out of fear or are 'defeated' in fights because of their physical weakness) or explicitly question the value of stereotypically masculine activities, the character's disinterest nonetheless offers readers an alternative masculinity that rejects certain heteronormative standards.

The novels always balance out these feminine characteristics with some stereotypically masculine traits such as athleticism, stoicism, and the ability to 'pass' as heterosexual. For authors to create characters with balanced gender identities, these heteronormative traits are as necessary as the traditionally feminine ones. However, the authors' motivations in giving their characters some level of masculinity—often overshadowing their femininity—are questionable. It is likely that the emphasis on these characters' masculine traits is designed to make the challenges to gender boundaries more acceptable to readers, keeping femininity confined within socially acceptable parameters. If this negotiation is necessary in order for readers to identify with alternative masculinities and embrace even the socially acceptable challenges to heteronormative masculinity, the trend speaks to readers' prejudices and internalized misogyny/effeminophobia, and also the absence of a positive representation of a very effeminate main character suggests that authors simply aren't even attempting to test readers' willingness to accept feminine traits in gay characters without heteronormative masculinity balancing them out.

One of the most common tactics for reinforcing the characters' heteronormative masculinity is making characters athletic despite their disinterest in watching sports. The sports that the characters play do, however, follow a pattern of resisting more hypermasculine team

sports like football, baseball, or basketball. Kyle's father in *Rainbow Boys* "nagged him to go out for sports. Kyle couldn't throw a ball to save his life, but he liked watching the Olympic swimmers on TV. So he joined the swim team, where he hid among laps in the pool and stole underwater glances" (13). Kyle's athleticism, particularly his characterization as a "Swim Team Star" on the back of the book, makes him a more balanced character for readers who might otherwise see his shyness and desperation as too feminizing, and the choice of an individual sport (and the problematic implication that Kyle's only motivation is to stare at his peers' bodies) keeps him from being grouped with the jocks at school. Similarly, Alex, Sprout, and Noah are all talented members of the cross-country teams, and Sprout, who is the junior captain of his team, acknowledges it as "the ultimate loner extracurricular activity" (28), while Ari and Lio both jog in their free time. Thom in *Hero* is the only one of these gender-balanced characters who plays a team sport, basketball, but he doesn't connect with any of the players on his team<sup>13</sup>. Thom's teammates avenge violence against him on the court "not out of loyalty to me, either.... By high school I'd learned it was easier not to make friends in the first place than to lose them after they found out about my dad. But even if the team didn't care much about me personally, they didn't like someone else getting away with a cheap shot against them" (Moore 18). Thom is unable to make connections with others primarily because of his father's history, but it is clear that others' perceptions of his homosexuality also make him an outcast: a complete stranger identifies Thom

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<sup>13</sup> The masculine gay character who plays a sport (Jason of *Rainbow Boys*) is accepted by his team after coming out in *Rainbow High*, according to Crisp (\*), suggesting that team brotherhood and acceptance is affected more by the ability to 'pass' as straight than by sexuality. Thus Thom, who can't 'pass,' only experiences team brotherhood when playing basketball and Jason, who can, experiences brotherhood from his teammates outside of athletic settings. Alex of *What They Always Tell Us* has his sexuality questioned by classmates, but not by his cross-country teammates, so it is unclear whether or not he can 'pass.' As he never comes out, it is unclear whether or not his teammates' acceptance would continue if they knew he was gay, but it is possible that his team relationship (albeit in an individual sport) could challenge this finding.

as “the gay guy” (Moore 26) and Thom’s basketball coach kicks him off of the team because of it. Thom’s participation in a team sport is thereby feminized, as he is still a “loner” despite the team mentality and ultimately is unable to play the sport he loves on a team, instead playing one-on-one basketball with his love interest for fun.

Those characters who don’t accept or embrace their sensitivity and emotionality (as Craig and Noah do, albeit with some embarrassment) often tend to be stoic and detached with others as a means of establishing a more masculine personality. Often, these characters deliberately fight against any emotional responses in an effort to avoid seeming feminine or weak, or they mentally keep their distance from their own emotions, enabling them to ignore symptoms of depression and stay out of touch with other feelings that make them uncomfortable, such as attraction to other men. Ari, for example, doesn’t talk much at all, especially about personal issues, explaining that he pretends not to need words (Sáenz 200). While his love interest, Dante, wants to discuss such personal topics as kissing, masturbation, and love, Ari shies away from the discussion and doesn’t write back if the topic makes him too uncomfortable. When Dante writes Ari a letter asking about masturbation, Ari is angry and embarrassed, thinking, “*I am not interested in having a conversation about masturbation with anyone. What the hell was wrong with that guy?*” (220). He is so detached from his emotions, in fact, that his parents must inform him that he’s in love with Dante when Ari doesn’t even believe that he has any homosexual feelings. Similarly, Lio in *Gone, Gone, Gone* hates talking, especially on the phone, and when he brings up his emotional and personal issues, he uses frankness and humor to maintain his masculinity. He writes an email to Craig saying, “Went to therapy. You’ll be happy to know I’m still a little fucked up. We didn’t talk about DEAD BROTHER this session. Kind of a gyp” (Moskowitz 41). Sprout, too, is open about his personal issues and is almost confrontational

about them, presenting a tough exterior and dying his hair green because, as the new kid, people bullied him and he decided “that if there had to be a target on my head, I’d paint it there myself” (66). Alex, one of the few characters whose depression is pretty openly revealed, even if the word is never mentioned, also maintains an even-keeled temperament throughout the novel. He doesn’t cry, rarely smiles, and avoids talking altogether, especially about personal issues.

Finally, heteronormative masculinity is reinforced through other characters’ perceptions of the protagonists’ sexuality. For instance, while peers identify some of these characters as gay early on, sometimes even before a character himself has come to terms with it, others are easily able to “pass” as straight. Jason in *Rainbow Boys* is surprised that Kyle is gay because he seems “so... normal—the shy swimmer kid with glasses who always wore a baseball cap” (Sanchez 5), particularly in relation to “the school fag, Nelson Glassman—or Nelly, as everyone called him” (Sanchez 2). Alex’s brother James, too, compares his stereotyped image of “men who seem more like women to James, with their girly way of talking, their constant hand gestures... Nathen is nothing like any of those guys. Nor is Alex, now that he thinks about it. They aren’t girly at all” (126). In these cases, the “straight-acting” trope is harmful for readers, even when combined with feminine traits that other characters don’t perceive or problematize. The novels’ depiction of a gay character’s ability to ‘pass’ as a positive feature, rather than an effect of oppression, perpetuates expectations in both the gay and straight communities that all men, regardless of their sexuality, should act straight in order to meet standards of heteronormative masculinity. Through the depiction of characters with both stereotypically feminine and masculine traits, these novels present alternative, balanced masculinities—neither extremely feminine nor extremely masculine. These representations challenge contemporary gender binaries and offer young readers alternative masculinities that are generally depicted as positive. However, that so

many authors feel the need to emphasize their protagonist's masculinity is potentially problematic, as it suggests that femininity *must* be balanced out with masculine traits and even perpetuates harmful and homophobic ideals of 'straight-acting' that minimize the challenges that these characters otherwise would pose to contemporary gender roles.

### **Gender Extremes in *Rainbow Boys* and the Perpetuation of Negative Stereotypes**

While ten protagonists embody some level of this potentially gender-bending 'balanced' identity, two protagonists' gender identity characterizations are very problematic by comparison. One protagonist, Nelson in *Rainbow Boys*, exhibits a high level of effeminacy, which could have the potential to break gender boundaries and give readers a positive depiction of an effeminate gay man with whom to identify. However, Nelson is not depicted in a positive way at all in Sanchez's series. He is first described through the eyes of the most normatively masculine character, Jason, who "couldn't stand the freak—his million earrings, his snapping fingers, his weird haircuts. Why didn't he just announce he was a homo over the school loudspeaker?" (Sanchez 2). This description is negative in itself in that it reinforces perceptions of effeminate gay men as intentionally calling attention to themselves and their sexuality and that effeminate behavior makes someone a "freak." Nelson's other characterizations are just as problematic. Crisp problematizes Nelson's role as the only "queer and proud" character in the novel, pointing out that "there is little about Nelson that reflects an image of being 'proud' of who he is: he is portrayed as someone with deep-rooted self-hatred, frequently saying things like, 'It's not easy being me. Imagine what I have to put up with twenty-four/ seven' (50)" (251). Moreover, Nelson is cast in the stereotype of sexually insatiable gay man and placed in what Crisp deems a

feminine role in sexual situations, choosing to lie about his sexual experience and not to ask for protection because he doesn't want to ruin his chances of having sex with masculine characters (Crisp 251). Nelson refers to Jason, who identifies as a man, with feminine pronouns. While Crisp sees this as potentially gender-bending, Nelson uses the pronouns exclusively for Jason, at least in the first installment of the series, in an effort to insult him and undermine his masculinity in Kyle's eyes. Crisp summarizes the issues Nelson poses in the novels: "If Nelson is supposed to operate as a reader's only example of what it means (and looks like) to be 'Queer and Proud,' it is troubling that he exists only to satisfy the needs of the 'masculine' male and that he remains virtually static throughout most of the entire series: he never learns from his experiences or thinks before he acts" (252).

Although not all gay men are effeminate, a significant portion of the gay community is considered to be more stereotypically feminine. Psychologist Kittiwut Jod Taywaditep found in his literature review that anywhere from 15% to 30% of gay men are gender-nonconforming (5), while the research he reviewed overall found that "the effeminate stereotype appears to be valid for gay men on average" (4). In the novels analyzed for this project, readers are given only one effeminate main character who embodies many negative stereotypes and is simply unlikable, and thus readers are not given an opportunity to identify with an effeminate character and are encouraged to view effeminate gay men in this negative light. The only positive representation of an effeminate character in these texts is Infinite Darlene in *Boy Meets Boy*, who seemingly identifies more as a woman than as a gay man because of the feminine pronouns she prefers and her choice to change her name. Furthermore, Infinite Darlene is only a side character, not even a close friend of the main character, Paul's. The overall lack of positive representations of effeminate gay men, and especially of gay male main characters who are effeminate, is a serious

problem that perpetuates a binary between masculine and feminine gay men and reinforces biases against femininity within the gay community.

On the other hand, only one protagonist, Jason from *Rainbow Boys*, exhibits unrealistically extreme standards of masculinity. In itself, a representation of a hypermasculine gay man doesn't necessarily reinforce problematic gender roles. However, Jason's masculinity is privileged and his rejection of effeminacy goes unquestioned in the novel. Crisp points out that Jason's "status as an attractive star athlete permits him to discover his sexuality at both his girlfriend's and co-protagonist Kyle's expense" (245) and that his "self-perceived 'femininity' leads him to constantly work to embody 'masculine' characteristics (i.e., he routinely wills himself not to cry, but if he must, he does so alone and privately; he is aggressive and physically violent)" (246). When he comes out, Crisp notes, "Jason is heteronormatively hailed as a hero and a role model by the media, his peers, and superiors [...]. Most importantly, his status as 'jock' trumps his identity as gay and his popularity remains unquestioned: even the most homophobic students still embrace and accept him" (247). This broad acceptance contrasts starkly with the bullying and homophobia Nelson and Kyle still face, and yet they continue to look up to him as a hero even though they came out earlier and have been struggling with bullying and homophobia for a much longer time. Perhaps most troubling, Crisp points out numerous ways that Jason is set apart from the other gay protagonists and privileged above them:

"Jason's 'masculinity' actually distances him from the other homosexuals in the book. On the road trip, he is happy to be able to take a break from Kyle and Nelson and play basketball with a group of strangers because, 'it felt great to be around *normal* guys again, who played by clear, established rules; guys who

looked and acted like guys were supposed to look and act' (p. 86, italics in original), and heteronormativity is reinforced when homosexual characters who aren't 'masculine' are cast as deviants and outcasts." (248-249)

Jason's role as the "Tragic closet jock" (Sanchez 20) serves only to privilege masculinity over effeminacy and set unrealistic standards of masculinity for readers. The heteronormative power he wields goes unquestioned in the novel, and he is cast as "normal" in comparison to Nelson and even relative to his love interest, Kyle, who fawns over Jason despite Jason's anti-effeminacy attitudes and his tendency to use Kyle for sex and play with his emotions (Crisp 246).

### **Masculine Identity Development and Interpersonal Relationships**

The love interests of seven of the twelve protagonists are depicted as highly masculine, exhibiting few, if any, feminine traits. Nathen in *What They Always Tell Us* is a prime example of this hypermasculinity. In *Hero*, Thom's love interest, Goran, is a superhero without powers who is ever-present to protect and help Thom and to challenge him to one-on-one basketball. Even Noah of *I'll Give You the Sun*, who hates "normal" people who can fit in, is still interested in Brian when he discovers that he's not a revolutionary after all, but popular and a star baseball pitcher. Significantly, no gay protagonists' love interests are characterized as effeminate at all. That so many love interests (at least seven) are presented as very masculine, while the rest embody the popular 'balanced' gender expression and absolutely none are significantly feminized, suggests that masculinity is attractive and femininity is not only unattractive but not even a possibility in a love interest. Thom in *Hero* reinforces this as he describes his "strict rules

for looking at porn” (Moore 40). One rule is “absolutely no kids. I never understood the fascination with young hairless boys anyway. I wanted someone big and broad and hairy, a real man like you used to see in magazines and on TV from the late ‘70s. Mechanics, plumbers, lifeguards, and cowboys with dirty hands” (Moore 41). Aside from the problematic conflation of homosexuality and attraction to ‘young hairless boys’ with pedophilia, Thom’s distaste for male bodies that don’t fit into a very strict definition of masculinity leaves readers with the belief that, in order to be attractive, they must meet unrealistic standards of masculinity.

While the representation of characters with a balance between masculine and feminine traits has the potential to push against gender boundaries by offering a variety of positive alternative masculinities, the privileging of masculinity and repudiation of femininity in both protagonists and their love interests perpetuates binaries of masculine or “straight acting” and effeminate gay men within the gay community and for readers. Readers who identify as effeminate may struggle with the lack of positive main characters with whom to identify, and many gay readers are likely to feel that they should push themselves to embody unhealthy ideals of masculinity.

In many cases, a character’s need to fulfill certain standards of masculinity is connected to his relationships with others—especially his relationship with his parents. For a few protagonists, their fathers or families already know that they are gay and their sexuality appears to be a nonissue. In *Gone, Gone, Gone*, Lio hasn’t told his father that he’s gay yet, but thinks “he’s probably figured it out. If he hasn’t, I don’t think it’s going to be a big deal to him, as long as I assure him we can still watch football” (Moskowitz 56). Craig’s family, too, is completely accepting, and in the pseudo-utopian town of *Boy Meets Boy*, everyone is supportive (although Paul’s friend in a neighboring town still must deal with his parents’ homophobia). Alex in *What*

*They Always Tell Us* is the only one who doesn't come out to his parents at all; in fact, the only person who Alex tells, besides his love interest Nathen, is his brother James. Their community is very homophobic, and they don't think they can publicly come out, but there is no indication that either of Alex's parents, both of whom have been very supportive of him after his suicide attempt, would take much issue with his homosexuality. These depictions of accepting families are positive representations for readers who may be struggling to come out and feeling intimidated by clichéd stories of familial rejection. The accepting families also show gender equality, where both the mother and father are accepting and neither relationship is more significant to the protagonist. In these ways, these representations challenge contemporary gender expectations.

Unlike these novels where family relationships are a nonissue, eight of the twelve protagonists struggle in some way with their relationship with their father. Ari's relationship with his father is significant in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, and while the relationship is crucial to the development of Ari's masculine identity, any tensions seem unrelated to Ari's sexuality. Rather, Ari is concerned with the lack of emotional connections with his father and trying to figure out who his father is by "collect[ing] clues" (Sáenz 37) because he doesn't feel comfortable asking his father about his life. Later, Ari observes Dante kiss his father on the cheek "as if all that kissing was perfectly normal. I wondered what my father would do if I ever went up to him and kissed him on the cheek. Not that he would yell at me. But—I don't know" (Sáenz 41). Ultimately, Ari and his father grow closer and learn to talk about the difficult things, but Ari's father is the one who tells Ari that he's in love with Dante. It hadn't really occurred to Ari before the conversation, and his brief difficulties accepting it are unrelated to his father's ideals and more connected to the inability to understand his own emotions, an inability borne of his family's emotional disconnect. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the*

*Universe* is the only one of the novels analyzed here that depicted a significant father-son relationship that was largely unrelated to the protagonist's homosexuality.

In contrast to Ari, seven of the other protagonists struggle to live up to their father's masculine expectations, both real and perceived. For some protagonists, their father's homophobia is real, not imagined. In the case of *Rainbow Boys*, all three of the protagonists' fathers exhibit differing levels of homophobia. Jason's father is a drunk, abusive man whose homophobia drives his relationship with his son and ultimately leads to the destruction of their family. Kyle's father acts as though homosexuality is both a choice and "contagious," assuming that Nelson is responsible for Kyle's sexuality and hardly speaking to Kyle for over a month, but he announces that he's joining PFLAG with Kyle's mother at the end of the novel. Nelson's father doesn't live with him and his mother, and stands Nelson up when they're supposed to get together. When he does call Nelson, it's to tell him to "just be normal, so your mom doesn't phone me all the time, worried about you" (Sanchez 221). Thom's story in *Hero* is almost entirely about his relationship with his father, who won't believe that Thom is gay until he publicly comes out. After the big reveal, his father throws the bucket he was using to wash the spray-painted slur "Faggot" off of the garage door "with such force that the metal pail shattered into bits" (Moore 281). In the end, however, Thom's father helps Thom fight the story's supervillain and makes him promise to "love as much as you can" (Moore 420). Sprout's father breaks their computer when he finds gay sites on the Internet history, and comes to terms with it only after getting drunk, saying, "Hey. You're a fag. I'm a drunk. Nobody's perfect [...]. That was mean. You're gay. I'm an alcoholic" (73). This 'acceptance' equates homosexuality with a harmful and pathological addiction, and though Sprout's father shows no discomfort or homophobia around Sprout after this scene, the two rarely talk and have a very distant

relationship. Sprout's sexuality is never a topic of conversation, and Sprout does not tell his father about his love interest.

Conversely, some of the protagonists' fathers accept their sons' homosexuality immediately despite previously holding them to high standards of masculinity. Steven's father tells him about gay men who served with him in the military who were "some of the bravest, most decent men I have ever known" (LaRoche 171) and Noah's father simply says that his homosexuality "makes more sense" than heterosexuality when he sees Noah and Brian together (Nelson 371). However, prior to these rather positive coming-out experiences, the characters' fathers held them to very high standards of masculinity. Steven's father takes him ice fishing, and attempts to show an interest for his father's sake, and when he asks his father if he's always wanted to date girls, his father obliviously asks, "As opposed to dating what, Steven? Gorillas? Of course I always wanted to date girls" (LaRoche 90). Noah, especially, fears "what would happen if he knew?" (Nelson 8) and runs away before his father can make him watch a football game or action movie or listen to jazz music (Nelson 10). Noah frequently refers to the "Noah the Broken Umbrella Talks" his father has with him—talks about his father's desire for Noah to be more masculine. Noah quotes his father saying, "You need to be brave even when you're afraid, that's what it means to be a man.... You need to act tough sit up, stand straight, fight hard, play ball, look me in the eye, think before you speak.... Doesn't it bother you to have a girl [Noah's twin sister] fight your battles for you?" (Nelson 78). But they connect later on in the novel as Noah's father feels increasingly alienated from his family, especially Noah's mother, and although Noah still won't tell his father the truth about his sexuality, the masculine expectations seem to have faded significantly enough that, when Noah does come out, his father is unconcerned and accepting.

While nine protagonists struggle with their relationships with their fathers, only three worry about their relationships with their mothers, and these relationships have little if anything to do with their masculinity. The overall absence of significant mother-son relationships reinforces the novels' (and thus readers') identification with masculinity and against femininity. Steven and Kyle both come out to their mothers, who react nervously and with some homophobia, but quickly come around. Noah's relationship with his mother is much more complex, but it is linked closely to his relationship with his father: feeling unable to connect to his father and envious of his sister, Noah turns to his artistic mother for approval and affection. When she walks in on him masturbating with Brian, however, he is furious with her despite her support and blames her for ruining his relationship with Brian and for her separation from his father. After he yells at her for having an affair, she gets into a fatal car accident and is removed completely from his life.

Noah's mother is thus also one of four mothers who are absent from their son's lives in some way. Lio's and Thom's mothers both left their husbands and children and Sprout's mother died before the start of the novel. When Thom's mother returns immediately after Thom's coming out, she is mysterious and distant, traits that are compounded by her superpower of invisibility which she now struggles to control. She tells him the truth about what happened to disgrace his father, joins Thom and his father in the final climactic fight, and ultimately dies. Her literal invisibility serves as a metaphor for the way her role in Thom's life is represented: though she lived with them for much of Thom's childhood, Thom rarely thinks about moments in their past and she serves as a simple plot device, giving Thom the tools he needs to save the world and disappearing until her death. She doesn't offer any support for Thom as he struggles with his public coming out and even runs away rather than have an open conversation with him.

In all of the other novels, the protagonists' mothers are completely supportive of their son's sexuality. The contrast between the fathers' and mothers' relationships with their sons is troubling, as it suggests that fathers universally hold their sons to unrealistic standards of masculinity and are often homophobic, characteristics that strongly reinforce gender stereotypes. The implication is that they will be disappointed in some way by their son's sexuality, an intimidating trend for young gay men to be exposed to so consistently (although those novels that show fathers immediately accepting their son's sexuality successfully combat this stereotype), and that mothers will either be unquestionably supportive and loving or that their reactions would matter so little that they aren't told and even aren't allowed to continue being a part of their sons' lives. The trend implies a rejection of femininity much like the rejection of effeminate gay men, but this time through the dominant cultural narrative of masculine identity development: the young man does not need his mother's approval and needs to separate from his mother, playing into the dominant cultural narratives of autonomy and separation noted in the feminist psychoanalytic theory that Pascoe employed in her research. The protagonists' recurring need to both gain his father's approval and be like him also suggests Freudian roots—the trend is particularly reminiscent of the Oedipus Complex, in which the son cannot compete with his father for his mother's attention and therefore renounces his mother and emulates his father in order to diminish competition between them. The novels' employment of Freudian concepts of identity development highlight the sexism inherent in a cultural conception of masculinity as separation from the mother and emulation of the father.

The rejection of femininity is continued in the protagonists' friendships. Five of the twelve protagonists have a female best friend at some point in the novel, and all five of these relationships are problematic. For Paul and Sprout, their female best friends (Joni and Ruthie,

respectively) are good, supportive friends until a male love interest gets involved. Paul disapproves of Joni's new boyfriend, and the two fight and do not make up by the end of the novel, although Joni grudgingly joins Paul in helping their mutual friend Tony in the end. Sprout's best friend Ruthie is his "one good friend" (28). She becomes bizarrely preoccupied with having sex with Ian, the boy with whom Sprout's been hooking up (Sprout hasn't told Ruthie about him), and the two don't interact throughout the entire novel except to announce her success at making Ian her boyfriend and to sabotage, perhaps unintentionally, Sprout's new romance. Ruthie's motivations for her strange and seemingly vengeful behavior are never explored, but there is a slight suggestion that Ruthie knew about Sprout's hookups and wanted to make him unhappy. Sprout doesn't make up with Ruthie at the end of the novel and, significantly, tells readers that they can write an ending for Ruthie or Ian, but he won't say what happened to either of them.

Steven's best friend Rachel is mostly a positive character, but she tries to push Steven well past his comfort zone, immediately trying to start a Gay-Straight Alliance at school even though Steven feels uncomfortable with it, and when she asks if she can start it without him, "the look that [he] gave her was plenty loud" (LaRoche 133)—apparently a resounding no—and although he desperately wants to talk to someone about his sexuality, he is "afraid if I said anything more to Rachel, she'd organize a citywide demonstration, or nominate me for National Gay Student of the Year" (173). Nelson's female best friend, Shea, identifies as a lesbian, and he ignores her when she's going through a difficult breakup. He attempts to apologize, but she is so hurt that she says she can't be friends with him anymore. Finally, Noah's female best friend is Heather, a girl who he kissed at a party when he was thirteen by pretending she was Brian. At the time, she was extremely hurt, and although presumably in the time between this scene and their

friendship years later he apologized and told her the truth, their friendship perpetuates ideas that gay men have a free pass to use women to prove their heterosexuality to others, regardless of the pain it may cause the woman involved. For the five characters with female best friends, the young woman's personhood is devalued and even taken away, and their behaviors are often portrayed as irrational and emotional, reinforcing negative stereotypes of women. The rejection of mothers and female best friends in so many of these novels thus perpetuates sexist ideals for masculine independence.

Only two of the characters have a gay man as their best friend.<sup>14</sup> Paul's friendship with Tony is very strong and positive, but Kyle's best friend, Nelson (who views Kyle initially as a love interest and Shea as his best friend), is problematic. In addition to Nelson's unlikable characterization, his inability to perceive his relationship with Kyle as platonic reinforces stereotypes of gay men as sexually out of control and particularly that two gay men can't be friends. Lio does have gay friends from before he moved, and attempts to recruit boys from the GSA at his school to make up a "posse," but his best friend is still his love interest, Craig. Jason is the only character with a straight male best friend, Corey, who encourages him to stop hanging around Kyle so people won't think that he's gay, but largely supports his decision to attend a GSA meeting. That the only gay-straight best friendship happens for the only highly masculine character suggests that a gay man has to act straight in order to be friends with a straight man. The lack of representations of friendships between gay men, particularly effeminate gay men, perpetuates homophobia and effeminophobia for readers, particularly within the gay community.

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, those characters who have friends—either best friends or other friends—who are queer, and especially who are gay men, are universally more accepting of their homosexuality and are 'out,' showing the power that such friendships can have on a character's masculine identity development. The pattern suggests that being friends with or forming a sort of brotherhood with other gay men and potentially other queer people helps gay teens to develop a confident and self-accepting masculinity.

With the exception of a few novels that successfully push back against them, the stereotypes that gay men can't be friends without becoming romantically involved and that the worlds of straight men and gay men must be separated are reinforced for contemporary readers.

### Conclusion

LGBTQ YA is growing exponentially, and with that growth has come a wide range of representations of gay male characters and their relationships. The protagonists themselves are often characterized as neither very masculine nor very feminine, instead embodying alternative masculinities that offer readers positive models with whom to identify that don't always demand unhealthy ideals of masculinity. However, the apparent necessity of heteronormatively masculine traits to balance out and even overpower femininity suggests either that readers won't accept extremely feminine characters or that authors believe that the challenges presented by feminine characteristics must be accompanied by heteronormative masculinity in order to be acceptable to readers. Additionally, the depiction of a couple key protagonists—Nelson and Jason from *Rainbow Boys*—and the characterization of most protagonists' love interests privilege masculinity over femininity and offer no positive representations of effeminate gay men, reinforcing negative views of effeminacy both within the gay community and in the general population. This rejection of femininity continues in the portrayals of mothers and female best friends, who are represented as negative influences, irrational, or simply ignored. Fathers, on the other hand, are depicted as having unhealthy standards of masculinity, and their negative reactions to their sons' homosexuality could reinforce gay readers' fears about coming out to their fathers. Those novels that depict the characters' coming out as a nonissue or that dispel

characters' initial fears of their father's disapproval with their father's immediate acceptance, however, challenge gender stereotypes. Finally, the stereotypes that gay men can't be platonic friends and that gay men and straight men can't be friends are challenged in a few novels, but are perpetuated in the majority of the texts analyzed here. Overall, some challenges to gender stereotypes are presented in these novels, and from Cart and Jenkins's 2004 study, it seems that the genre has come a long way. However, the many problematic gender roles that are reinforced in these novels are still an issue. Young adult novels with gay themes therefore still need to work toward fighting back against high standards of masculinity, negative depictions of women and effeminate men, and perpetuating various cultural stereotypes.

## Chapter 3

### **Brotherhood and Masculine Identity Development: The Role of Sibling Relationships When Masculinity is Threatened in Young Adult Literature**

According to recent estimates, about 80% of people have at least one sibling<sup>15</sup>. For a vast majority of young adults today, siblings are a major part of everyday life, and the sibling relationship is vital to the development of these teenagers' identities. Sociologists Susan M. McHale, Ann C. Crouter, and Shawn D. Whiteman, in their literature review "The Family Contexts Of Gender Development In Childhood And Adolescence," explain the roles siblings often play for each other:

siblings can influence one another by serving as models, advisors, social partners and combatants. Siblings also indirectly influence each other by virtue of their impact on the roles and relationship dynamics of the larger family system. Finally, as they pursue their own interests, siblings can provide their sisters and brothers with exposure to and opportunities for novel social experiences and activities. (140)

While various studies on siblings' influences on gender development sometimes differed in their findings, the authors found that, overall, a sibling's gender plays a significant role in the development of gender identity through gendered play activities and family roles and relationships. They also found that most of the studies confirmed "a social learning prediction that children would imitate the qualities of their siblings, and thus that children with sisters

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<sup>15</sup> Chicago Tribune, US Census Bureau Cited in "One-Child America" by Jennifer Graham.

would develop more feminine qualities and those with brothers more masculine ones” (140). The authors also cite a previous study by McHale, Updegraff, Helms-Erikson, and Crouter, which “showed more consistent linkages between the gendered attitudes, personality qualities and leisure activities of siblings than between children’s attributes and those of their mothers or their fathers” (140), demonstrating that, at least in gender development, sibling relationships are even more significant than parent-child relationships.

For brother-brother pairs, this influence on gender development is likely to increase the emphasis on traditionally masculine ideals. A study by Stoneman, Brody, and MacKinnon found that “brother-brother pairs engaged in more stereotypically masculine play (e.g., play with balls, vehicles, or toy weapons) than any other group” and that “brother-brother pairs interacted less than other dyads” (qtd. in McHale et. al. 141). These findings show that standards of traditional masculinity, such as athleticism and distant relationships with others, especially other men, are reinforced to a greater extent in brother-brother relationships than in brother-sister or sister-sister relationships.

In addition to this direct influence, however, McHale, Crouter, and Whiteman note the importance of sibling “deidentification.” They explain,

Sibling influences are notoriously difficult to detect, however, because at the same time that social learning processes serve to make siblings similar to one another, a second process, sibling deidentification, may operate to make siblings different[...]. Sibling deidentification refers to a dynamic whereby siblings actively work to develop different attributes and interests in an effort to establish their own niches in the family and reduce sibling rivalry. Some work on siblings’

role in gender development suggests that sibling deidentification processes may become evident in adolescence as youth focus on developing their unique identities (Grotevant, 1978; McHale *et al.*, 2001). (141)

In the development of masculinity, then, teenaged boys with brothers are likely to develop their masculine identity both by modeling their behavior off of the masculine expectations exhibited by his brother, as well as by forming an identity that differs from his brother's.

Significantly there is little, if any, research on the influence of a twin on one's gender identity development, with studies largely focusing on the genetic and environmental factors responsible for variations in twin gender expressions and identities. However, research does show that the twin relationship is more significant than other sibling relationships to identity development more generally. Researcher Meike Watzlawik cites Åkerman's finding that "twins have more difficulties in developing independence and a positive identity than nontwins due to the fact that they have to emancipate themselves both from their parents and their cotwins" (562). Watzlawik also cites past studies that suggest that "twins function as transitional objects for one another. As transitional objects, twins compensate for the fact that the mother (or other prime caregiver) has to provide for two infants at the same time" (575) as well as a finding that "monozygotic twins derive more self-esteem from their sibling relationship during adolescence than dizygotic twins or nontwins" (575). In a study of sibling identification and deidentification, Watzlawik found that monozygotic twins name fewer differences between themselves, "a sign for less deidentification" (575). Psychiatrist Hanna Ebeling and her colleagues cited numerous studies indicating that twins take on dominant-submissive roles in relation to each other, which may serve as a form of deidentification so that "twin siblings can avoid conflict and enhance

mutual cooperation. Split roles can also help twins to develop their sense of self as separate from the co-twin by having certain distinguishing characteristics” (334). Additionally, she states that “Problems may occur if the process of individualization is not successful and one or both twins continue to identify themselves by their twinship” (334), suggesting that twins whose identities revolve around their sibling relationship may struggle to form positive identities independent of one another. Overall, however, various studies found that the differences between the identity development of twins and nontwins even out over time. Watzlawik cites a previous study that showed that “twins and nontwins do not differ in emotional closeness during adolescence” (576) and Ebeling found that “equality between co-twins in their dominance-submissiveness increased with age. After school age, 81% of twins considered themselves equal to their co-twin” (336). It should be noted that these studies are all very narrowly focused and do not go over more general forms of identity development, such as mirroring, that are likely to be present as twins form their senses of self.

Despite the many sociological and psychological studies indicating the importance of sibling relationships for identity development, there has been little, if any, critical work on representations of brother-brother relationships, or sibling relationships more generally, in young adult literature. The only research located for this analysis was a 1991 dissertation by Cathie Sampson, which found that nine of the twenty novels she examined protagonists who were only children, while a sibling relationship was only significant in six of the novels where a sibling was present. This study was limited to novels published from 1987 to 1991, and so it cannot necessarily be generalized to contemporary representations, especially as the genre as a whole has grown so significantly in the decades since that date. With such a large gap in the critical work, it is impossible to characterize depictions of brotherhood and masculinity across the entire

body of contemporary young adult literature. However, in situations when masculinity is threatened in a YA novel—as when a teen boy is diagnosed with cancer or is coming to terms with his homosexuality, as discussed in previous chapters—it is possible to examine the progression of a brother relationship, when present, and its influence on masculine identity development for either brother. I therefore analyzed the novels read for my studies of masculinity and illness and masculinity and homosexuality in young adult novels, this time specifically seeking out sibling relationships and comparing the influences of brothers and sisters on a male protagonist's masculine identity development.

Of the thirteen novels examined for the previous chapters, seven feature a protagonist with a biological brother. I examined each of the novels through the lens of brotherhood, particularly looking at how brotherhood affected masculine gender identity development in the characters and for ways in which brotherhood illuminated the intersections between illness, queerness, and masculinity, if at all. I also looked at protagonists' relationships with sisters in order to compare and contrast these gendered relationships' effects on protagonists' masculine identity development. Though their roles in the narratives vary, both brother and sister relationships are depicted as generally positive aspects of each protagonist's life. Brothers' acceptance, guidance, and respect are almost always depicted as very important to the protagonist's gender identity, whether the protagonist feels that his brother already gives him these or that he must somehow earn them. On the other hand, when a sister offers acceptance, it is depicted as a given that, while not vital to the protagonist's masculinity in the way a brother's acceptance might be, still offers support and reinforcement that helps the protagonist to form a positive masculine identity. Sisters rarely offer guidance or a model for the protagonist to

emulate, however, and they are more likely than brothers to patronize or even dehumanize the protagonist.

### **Sibling Relationships in Young Adult Cancer Novels**

Little sociological and psychological research has been performed to determine the experiences of siblings of cancer patients, and the research that has been done generally does not investigate how these experiences differ based on the sibling's gender. Alice Prchal and Markus A. Landolt's literature review, "Psychological Interventions With Siblings Of Pediatric Cancer Patients: A Systematic Review" synthesized much of the research that has been performed on cancer patients' siblings. Generally, they found that "healthy siblings are confronted with decreased availability of their parents [...]. Siblings may also be worried about the illness, and they have to observe their brother or sister undergo emotional and physical pain. Many siblings experience intrusive and conflicting emotions such as feelings of fear, isolation, jealousy, or guilt" (Prchal and Landolt 1241). Additionally, many siblings of pediatric cancer patients suffer psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, behavior problems, psychosomatic complaints, and posttraumatic stress (Prchal and Landolt 1241), but they may also experience some positive effects such as maturity, compassion, and closer family relationships (Prchal and Landolt 1241).

Researchers Lynne M. Kaplan, K. Julia Kaal, Lauren Bradley, and Melissa A. Alderfer studied 125 siblings of cancer patients aged 8-17. They found that about one-third of siblings in the sample met symptom criteria for PTSD, while over one-fifth met full criteria for PTSD (209). Interestingly, the authors' results reflected gender differences between brothers and sisters of cancer patients. For example, within the sample, "nearly twice as many girls (29%) than boys

(16%) fulfilled full criteria for PTSD” (212), yet boys were more likely to experience avoidance symptoms and have symptoms interfere with their functioning (209). However, the authors found that the gendered patterns were not statistically significant, so these findings may not be generalizable. No other studies reviewed for this analysis looked for gendered patterns in sibling’s experiences, so it is unclear how brothers and sisters differ in the psychological effects of a sibling’s cancer diagnosis and how they may manage this distress in different ways.

Though relatively significant quantities of research on psychosocial adjustment and quality of life in cancer patients themselves have been performed, none of these focus on the influence of the patients’ relationships with siblings. Measures of social support were the closest factors assessed in the literature reviewed for this study, and such measures cannot be generalized to sibling relationships. In the research examined here, no work was done on the influences of siblings on gender identity development for either the siblings or the cancer patients themselves had been done.

While sociological research has not revealed any significant gender patterns, the young adult cancer novels read for this analysis suggest that the gender of a cancer patient’s sibling makes a great difference for both the sibling and the patient himself in the development of a masculine gender identity. Two of the four cancer novels and one of the gay-themed novels that I analyzed featured relationships between protagonists diagnosed with cancer and their biological brothers. In *Zac and Mia* and *Gone, Gone, Gone*, brotherhood seems to illuminate problematic standards of masculinity and present potential challenges to those standards, while in *Deadline*, a positive representation of brotherhood provides readers with a model for gender development through mirroring, though the depiction of the relationship also perpetuates unrealistic standards of masculinity that go unquestioned. Meanwhile, sisters of the protagonists in *Zac and Mia*, *The*

*Time Capsule*, and *The Fault in Our Stars* offer three very different characterizations of brother-sister relationships: provider of guidance and support, undervalued and overly affectionate Other, and source of alienating patronization, respectively.

*In Zac and Mia* by AJ Betts, Zac's older brother Evan is a minor character, but his relationship with Zac has a great influence on Zac's gender identity development, as Evan sets high masculine expectations and repeatedly emasculates Zac with his teasing. However, the novel reveals fearful and emotional moments that Evan hides from Zac, potentially suggesting to readers the negative consequences of maintaining rigid expectations of stoic masculinity in brother relationships. But as Evan never lets down his guard around Zac and no one questions Evan's hypermasculine behavior, the potential for challenge is diminished. For much of the novel, Evan embodies an overly-compensatory masculinity, as when he suggests that Zac "convince the nurses to star in a porn movie" (Betts 63), dyes his hair so that no one can tell he's a redhead (Betts 19), and chases after yet another foreign girl their father hires to help pick olives (105). Zac describes Evan's tendency to "inevitably show off with the pneumatic rake, shooting olives like bullets into unsuspecting faces" (Betts 120). Evan also puts on a hypermasculine front by teasing Zac. He comments on a photo of Zac online while Zac is still in the hospital, saying, "Nice pic, scrotum-face. Suits you" (Betts 32), and though Zac calls him a prick, he also confesses that he finds Evan's description the most accurate. Once Zac returns home, he is relegated to the task of caring for the animals instead of his preferred olive picking, and is forced to use pink gloves. Evan, driving an ATV (another activity Zac is banned from), "rumbles close to the hayshed, sending up a cloud of dust, crap, and disgruntled poultry. 'Nice gloves,' he shouts [...] I give him a pink finger, but I reckon the intended impact is lost. What an ass" (Betts

119). In these scenes, Evan comes off as emotionless and even mean, and his bullying gets to Zac, whose already low self-esteem takes a hit with each emasculating joke.

Yet rather than simply painting Evan as the bullying older brother, Betts includes a few glimpses of the emotions he's hiding with these masculine behaviors, and readers gather that his actions are a sort of defense mechanism. At the start of the novel, Zac thinks back to his first diagnosis, when his family would visit him in the hospital daily. He recalls that "Evan hung back, eyeing the drips and nurses with suspicion. 'Hospitals make me sick,' I heard him say once. 'The smell...' I didn't blame him—he didn't belong here either. At least he was honest about it" (Betts 21). The only other glimpses of emotion we get come almost at the end of the story, when Zac's cancer has returned and he's decided not to go through another transplant. Mia sees Evan "letting himself into a pen. He drops feed at his feet, where goats crowd him [...]. He pushes away a goat and wipes at tears with the back of his sleeve. *Oh god, I think, he's not brave enough either*" (Betts 268). Evan's relationship with Zac is distant and alienates Zac from his older brother, but this scene suggests the closeness Evan feels to Zac and problematizes hiding such emotions, especially since his means of hiding them are harmful to their relationship. Though the standards of masculinity Evan sets in his relationship with Zac aren't directly questioned or even resolved at the end of the novel, Betts suggests the potential for change by showing readers these moments when Evan's guard is down and readers may perhaps wish to establish a closer relationship with their own siblings, especially brothers, after following these characters.

Evan influences Zac's masculine identity development in a few ways. His teasing makes Zac feel emasculated, but also makes him angrier and potentially motivates him to "prove" his masculinity to his doubtful brother. Evan's emotional moments aren't shown to Zac, which only

increases the standard of masculine stoicism that Zac attempts to live up to, and Zac shows no desire to have Evan present in the hospital even if Evan were to feel comfortable visiting. But Evan also influences Zac's identity development by providing a model of someone Zac *doesn't* want to be like. For instance, Zac hopes his hair won't grow back red like his brother's, he shows no interest in chasing girls on the farm or elsewhere after seeing Evan get his heart broken so many times, and he seems to pass judgment on the fact that Evan's reading "is usually limited to *Zoo Weekly*" (Betts 106), though he himself resents reading *Pride and Prejudice* for English class, saying that it's "Worse than a lumbar puncture" (Betts 152). Evan's apparent feelings of emotional closeness with his brother don't end up influencing Zac's masculine identity development, though, because Zac never sees them and Mia doesn't tell him about them. Thus, while Evan and Zac's relationship has great potential to challenge expectations of masculinity within brother pairs, and might somewhat problematize these expectations in the eyes of readers, it ultimately leaves the unhealthy relationship and corresponding standards of masculinity intact.

In *Gone, Gone, Gone*, Lio's brother relationship is unique: both Lio and his twin brother, Theo, had cancer when they were young, but Theo died and Lio survived. Theo influences Lio's masculine identity development only through Lio's grief and consequent psychological difficulties following his brother's death, the pressure Lio feels as the only remaining son in the family, and even the physical expectations created for Theo at the time of his death. When telling others about Theo, Lio keeps the story very frank and refers to him almost jokingly in an email to Craig as the daunting "DEAD BROTHER" (Moskowitz 41). Privately, however, Lio reveals the significance of the relationship, telling readers:

“Theo is the reason everyone knows I need therapy. Theo is the reason I don’t like to talk. There isn’t some long, drawn-out, tortured explanation. It’s really pretty basic. My brother and I had the same face. My brother and I had the same voice. For some reason, he was born to talk and I was born to sing. We always knew that. For some reason, we both got cancer. For some reason, here I am.”  
(Moskowitz 34).

Later on, Lio tells Craig and his family about the service that his parents used when Theo died, which took a picture of Theo and adjusted it to show what he would have looked like at different ages. Lio explains that he cuts his hair and dyes it in a rainbow of colors so “I don’t look like the picture” (Moskowitz 160). Lio’s relationship with Theo is very much characterized by deidentification, both before and after Theo’s death. However, the ultimate growth in Lio’s masculine identity is when he and Craig dye his hair back to its natural blond, presumably just like Theo’s edited picture, and Craig says, “I can see you” (Moskowitz 238). The implication is that the process of deidentification was hiding Lio’s true self, and that being willing to look like his brother is a sign of acceptance and consequently improved mental health. Lio’s choice to display what Craig deems his true self—and his likeness to his twin brother—shows his character growth through a willingness to accept and work through his emotions, a less stereotypically masculine confrontation with his grief.

Like the relationships in *Zac and Mia* and *Gone, Gone, Gone*, Chris Crutcher’s *Deadline* features both modeling and deidentification in Ben’s relationship with his brother, Cody. Before Ben’s diagnosis, their relationship seems characterized by their differences. To their classmates, the younger Cody is “Big Wolf” and older Ben is “Little Wolf” because of the differences in

their physical size. Cody is the football star, Ben the track star. Ben prepares Cody for football games by doing complex math in his head, watching old game tapes, and explaining the opposing team's tactics in layman's terms to his brother, while Cody follows his brother's advice and puts the plans into action. Though objectively the brothers are very similar—both star athletes, both “wolves”—they and their peers emphasize these small differences as a form of sibling deidentification.

Once Ben is diagnosed with his mysterious blood disease, though, he takes the opportunity to play football like his younger brother, making their already close relationship even closer. Cody eventually catches on that something is wrong, and he tells Ben, “You don't hide things from your bro. Together we're like a whole person” (Crutcher 263). When Ben tells Cody the truth about his diagnosis, however, Cody doesn't even have an emotional reaction. He is only upset “that you didn't think you could walk straight out of the doctor's office and tell me” (Crutcher 264), and Ben knows that he's right because “I have loved my brother without condition or consideration for more than seventeen years. There is not a day I can remember when I wouldn't have laid my life down for him” (Crutcher 264). They share an emotionally close moment that breaks rules for a masculine brother relationship when Cody puts his arm around Ben “and I just lean into him. I can feel his cheek on top of my head” (Crutcher 265).

After this revelation, Cody learns to read other teams' defenses in football on his own and, after Ben's death, models after him closely. He goes for a run as Ben liked to do, makes Ben's goal of naming a street after Malcolm X a reality, and makes tentative plans to live with Ben's love interest and help take care of her son the next year. Initially, the two established their masculine gender identities in relation to each other through deidentification, finding masculine interests that the other did not share, but Ben's diagnosis enables him to risk sibling rivalry and

join the football team, where Cody is entirely supportive, and gives Cody the ability to succeed on his own and finish Ben's traditionally masculine endeavors after his brother's death. Though the characters' hypermasculine goals and interests go unquestioned, the closeness of the relationship, particularly the brief moment of physical intimacy when Cody puts his arm around Ben, gives readers a positive model for an emotionally connected relationship between brothers that other novels in this category do not feature.

Representations of the relationships between protagonists diagnosed with cancer and their sisters vary much more than do the representations of brother relationships. Zac's older sister Bec acts as a positive guide in Zac's masculine identity development, while Alexis, Adam's twin sister in *The Time Capsule*, serves mostly as the feminine point of reference in relation to whom Adam can deidentify, and Augustus's sisters in *The Fault in Our Stars* serve no purpose other than to patronize their younger brother.

*Zac and Mia* shows an emotionally close relationship between Zac and his older sister Bec, the family member whom Zac trusts most, and who is a positive influence on Zac's masculine identity development. Zac brings Mia to Bec when he needs help hiding her and has relatively open conversations with Bec while they care for the farm animals together. Bec reinforces Zac's masculinity when he's most in doubt. She reassures him that the coach who gave him a patronizing "Best Team Player" award is "a knob. You know that" (Betts 100) and promises that he's normal, "apart from when you're hurling trophies onto the Bibbulmun Track and muttering to yourself" (Betts 100). She encourages Zac to ignore Evan's teasing and, when Mia's staying in her house, she encourages Zac to give Mia the space she needs. Bec's role in Zac's life is to help him put things in perspective, and particularly to encourage him not to take

his masculinity so seriously, offering a viewpoint that doesn't feminize Zac but rather helps him to form a more balanced, rational masculinity.

In contrast, the central sibling relationship in *The Time Capsule* by Lurlene McDaniel, between twins Alexis and Adam, portrays the sister as insignificant to Adam's identity development. The narrative, focalized through Alexis, suggests that the twins are very close. For example, Alexis thinks about their supposed telepathy and ability to finish each other's sentences. The characters' actions, however, especially Adam's, suggest the pair's true distance. Readers are told repeatedly that the two can almost read each other's minds, and Alexis can sense when Adam goes unconscious and is rushed to the ER. Yet Adam never told her that his symptoms were returning, (and Alexis couldn't sense it), Adam pays no attention to Alexis's qualms about his girlfriend, who ends up breaking his heart, and Adam doesn't bother to tell Alexis that the medication affected his liver so strongly that he is going to die. Alexis is surprised to discover that their father took his lunch breaks at home to eat with Adam, something that Adam never mentioned despite the pairs' previous frustrations with their parents. The closeness that Alexis says that she feels throughout the novel, and even after Adam's death, seems increasingly imaginary, suggesting that Adam was much more distant with his sister than she was with him. Alexis seems to primarily serve the purpose of being a more emotionally connected lens through which to view Adam's experience with cancer, making it possible to portray him as emotionally stable and seemingly unaffected, especially in relation to his sister, and thus characterize him as more masculine than readers might otherwise perceive him.

Augustus's sisters in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, meanwhile, are flat characters whose only contribution to their brother's identity development is to patronize him in ways that perform the threat that femininity and mothering are assumed to pose to masculine autonomy.

They coo to him while he's lying on a hospital bed in what Hazel calls "precisely the same voice that one would use to tell an infant he was adorable" (250) and Hazel even wonders if Augustus increased his dose of pain medication to avoid this interaction. In babying Augustus, they emasculate him further and make him question his masculine identity even more than the effects of the cancer and its treatment already have. Taken together, the sisters of male protagonists with cancer play very different roles in the protagonists' masculine identity development, both from each other and from the protagonists' brothers. While sisters can be a positive influence, a reference point for deidentification, or patronizing threats, brothers seem to always serve as models with whom protagonists can identify and from whom they can differentiate themselves.

### **Gay Protagonists' Sibling Relationships in Young Adult Novels: A Pattern of Acceptance from Brothers and Sisters**

Like the research on the experiences of cancer patients and their siblings, there is some limited research on the relationships between LGBTQ people and their siblings, mostly focused on the ways siblings changed after their LGBTQ brother or sister came out. Again, not much of this research examines the differences between male and female siblings' experiences, and none examined the impact of the sibling relationship on gender identity development. Hilton and Szymanski's study noted a number of themes emerging from their interviews with straight siblings of lesbians and gay men. For instance, the researchers found that 11 of the 14 interviewees

“reported that their relationship [with their LG sibling] changed in some way, usually amplifying the already existing relationship [...]. The majority (n=9) of the participants described their sibling’s disclosure as bringing them closer together, whereas the other two noted that because their relationship was already negative or distant, the disclosure heightened the negativity or added to the lack of closeness.” (301)

The increased closeness was often attributed to greater openness from the LG sibling, and greater sensitivity and support from the heterosexual sibling (301). The researchers noted some negative trends among the interviewees, such as a general feeling that “gay equals being different” and that more people reacted with shock than happiness or acceptance at the initial disclosure (296). However, these problematic trends seemed to change with time, as the researchers also found that siblings often felt protectiveness or concern for their sibling, began dealing with and challenging heterosexism in their everyday lives, and experienced changes in themselves as a result of their sibling’s sexual orientation (296).

Toomey and Richardson’s survey of LGBTQ people’s perceptions of sibling relationships did find that LGBTQ people were equally likely to be out to both their brothers and sisters; however, they were more likely to come out to a sister first (857). Moreover, “relationships with female siblings were rated as closer than relationships with male siblings. In addition, sisters were perceived as more approving of respondents’ sexual behavior than were brothers” (855).

In gay-themed novels, sibling relationships play roles of varying importance. Significantly, five of the twelve gay protagonists—nearly half—were only children, a significant

difference from the proportion in the actual population, where only about one-fifth of children are raised as only children. One of the major differences between novels with siblings depicted and novels without siblings depicted is the importance of the parent relationship to the protagonist's identity development. The five only children—Kyle, Nelson, Steven, Thom, and Sprout—all worry about their relationship with their parents, and the parent-child relationship is particularly important to their masculine identity development. In contrast, four of the seven protagonists with siblings have relationships with their parents that are seemingly insignificant to their gender identity development. While there are certainly other potential factors influencing the unrealistic proportion of only children in these novels, the importance of the parent relationship could explain the absence of siblings in so many of the novels.

Five of the protagonists in the gay-themed novels have a brother: Paul in *Boy Meets Boy*, Alex in *What They Always Tell Us*, Lio and Craig in *Gone, Gone, Gone*, and Aristotle in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. However, Lio's brother died at a very young age, so his brother plays no apparent role in Lio's coming out and Lio doesn't think about him with regards to his sexual orientation at all. The four remaining brother pairs have very different relationships, notably influenced by the homophobia perpetuated in their communities, but all four contribute positively and significantly to the protagonist's, and sometimes the brother's, masculine identity development. Similar to the depictions of brotherhood in the novels, protagonists' relationships with sisters in the novels demonstrate overwhelming, even universal, acceptance of their brothers' homosexuality that is always a given. Sisters' influence on their brothers' masculine identity development is thus, like Jay and Todd's influences on their brothers', positive but more removed from the protagonist's sexual orientation, typically just

offering support, an object for deidentification, and often, a potentially feminizing protectiveness that only becomes negative when it turns into patronization.

For those brother pairs living in seemingly accepting communities—the settings of *Boy Meets Boy* and *Gone, Gone, Gone*—the brothers' acceptance of the protagonists' homosexuality is a given, and so the roles they play in the protagonists' masculine identity development are unrelated to sexual orientation. Paul and his brother Jay have a very positive relationship based on acceptance and mutual respect, helping Paul to form a confident and self-accepting masculine identity. Paul says that Jay, “(like any older brother) loves to see me squirm” (Levithan 60) so Paul does worry that he might embarrass him in front of his new boyfriend, Noah. When Jay meets Noah, he says, “Another gay boy? [...] Man, why can't you ever bring home a really cute sophomore girl to fall desperately in love with me?” (Levithan 65). As Paul's love triangle becomes more complicated and rumors fly around their school, Jay encourages Paul to “Hang in” (Levithan 116), and when a classmate starts taking bets about who Paul will end up with, Jay bets on Noah. Paul tells readers, “He's shown his faith, in his own twisted older-brother way” (Levithan 181). Jay even helps in supporting Paul's friend, Tony, whose parents are homophobic. He suggests that they “send in the P-FLAG commandos” (Levithan 115) and joins Paul's friend group in picking Tony up for a dance. In the very accepting town of *Boy Meets Boy*, Jay shows no signs of homophobia or discomfort at his brother's sexuality, and though he has his masculine differences—preoccupation with girls, a constant desire to eat, his athleticism—the differences don't bother Paul or make him feel insecure about his own masculinity. The support Paul receives from his brother helps him to build a positive, self-accepting gender identity that embraces his sexuality.

Craig's older brother Todd in *Gone, Gone, Gone* is a lot like Jay in his unconditional acceptance of Craig and his sexuality. At the start of the novel, however, Craig and Todd's relationship is unclear, and confuses even Craig. Todd is much older than Craig, working as a substitute teacher and at a suicide hotline while working on his Masters in Environmental Science, so their relationship is very different from Jay and Paul's. When Todd hugs Craig after his pets run away, Craig assumes it's only because Todd feels sorry for him (Moskowitz 16). Later, he says, "I don't mind when Todd likes me, even though I sometimes feel like I'm just his good deed for the day" (Moskowitz 54). Todd also speaks to Craig like he's his parent, saying, "I don't want you out looking for animals today" (Moskowitz 89), but rather than being angry about Todd's authoritative tone, Craig says "Todd's protectiveness would mean more if I thought he really liked me and didn't just not want another dead body on his conscience [from his work at the suicide hotline; he's not actually responsible for any deaths]" (Moskowitz 90). At this point, readers can see Craig's unreliability, both from these irrational statements and the utter lack of evidence for Craig's opinion that Todd doesn't care. By this point, we understand that Todd cares very much about Craig, and therefore gather that Craig's low self-esteem or (undiagnosed) depression are responsible for this feeling. At the end of the novel, these feelings are resolved. Todd asks Craig to skip school for the day to go fishing with him, and Craig agrees because "right now, I really want to be with my brother" and a positive relationship between them is shown:

"He tells me a shitload of dirty jokes that I have to remember to tell Lio. He gathers me under his arm and tells me the point of working nights was supposed to be so he had days free. And he's going to work on it. We talk about Lio, and about

this girl at work who he thinks maybe, maybe... He has no obligation to me. He's not my parent. He's just my big brother. And this is just one of the best days of my life" (Moskowitz 240).

Todd supports and cares for Craig and, by the end of the novel, treats him like a friend rather than a child, affirming Craig's independence instead of patronizing him. This respect, combined with the already-present unconditional love, helps to form a happier, more confident masculinity in Craig, who had been closed off and morose earlier on in the book.

Brothers in homophobic settings influence gay protagonist's masculine identity development in ways more directly related to homosexuality and gender more generally. In *What They Always Tell Us*, the development of brothers Alex and James's relationship is the major plotline of the story. James both intimidates Alex, causing him to develop a more self-conscious and negative masculine identity, and later accepts Alex, helping him to build his confidence and accept his own sexuality. In the novel, Alex's sexuality is an important aspect of his relationship with James, but the brothers' differences from each other and Alex's past suicide attempt also play a major role. Though they were very close when they were younger, exploring the woods together and being mistaken for twins, the two have drifted apart by the start of the novel. Alex thinks of their childhood as "when James still looked him in the eyes and Alex could return such a look without feeling like he was being intrusive. Without feeling the need to apologize for something" (Wilson 13). As their relationship developed, Alex made clear attempts to reduce sibling rivalry through deidentification, Alex didn't play any sports not because he didn't ever want to but because "James always got there first. James conquered soccer, and then baseball. Even basketball for a while. Then he found tennis. By the time it was Alex's turn, he naturally

shied away, because he knew he wouldn't be the star that James was. What was the point?" (Wilson 104). When he starts running cross country, Alex "feels like he has found *his* spot in the athletic realm, one that stands apart from James" (Wilson 105). He also likes keeping his hair short because "it sets him apart from James" (Wilson 11). Early on in the novel, Alex recalls James crying after Alex's suicide attempt and angrily telling him not to try it again. He says James seemed to be "pissed at himself for bawling in front of Alex. After all, Alex was the one who cried, the weak one" (Wilson 20). The distinct difference Alex both perceives and creates between himself and James directly influence his own feelings of masculinity.

Alex perceives their distance as resulting primarily from his past suicide attempt, after which James's look of "pure disgust" (Wilson 16) and avoidant behavior lead Alex to believe "it would probably kill James to sit in a car with Alex, forced to chat with him" (Wilson 38) and that James thinks he's crazy (Wilson 7). These perceptions aren't entirely off: James doesn't like being around Alex; in fact, just Alex's presence gets on his nerves and puts him on edge, because Alex is "morose and quiet when he used to be good-natured" (Wilson 25). But Alex doesn't realize that James "wants to ask, 'Who are you and what have you done with my brother?'" (Wilson 31) and does genuinely worry about him, even though he acts as though he's just concerned about his parents.

In addition to this strain, James's suspicions about Alex's sexual orientation initially increase the tension in their relationship. Unlike Paul and Jay or Craig and Todd, Alex and James live in a homophobic Alabama city, and James's homophobia comes through as people suggest that Alex might be gay and in a relationship with James's best friend Nathen. James punches someone at a party just for making this suggestion, and later reassures himself that Alex and Nathen couldn't possibly be gay because they're not "girly" and therefore don't fit into his

stereotype of gay men (Wilson 126). However, James begins to feel angry with himself for not defending Alex when people mock him in front of James and for not being there for Alex, and so when Alex is upset about being bullied at school, James confronts him and Alex essentially admits that he's gay. James thinks that, regardless of whether or not Alex is gay, he "would be miserable without Alex in the world" (Wilson 162). James handles Alex's tears in this scene without any difficulty, something apparently unusual for him, but when James is alone, he begins to sob. Though we don't know how Jay and Todd react to their brothers' homosexuality, since both of those characters came out before the novel's start, they seem completely unconcerned with their younger brothers' sexual orientation, likely because of their progressive settings, and any conflict they do have is unrelated to sexuality. James's sobbing reaction is thus very unique. He takes the news of his brother's sexuality very hard for reasons that go unexplained and unquestioned by James. After this revelation, James confronts the bully for Alex, and at the end of the novel, we see the pair hanging out with a few mutual friends, their relationship apparently closer than ever before.

James plays a key role in Alex's identity development. Just as James's distance made Alex's struggle with depression more difficult, James's support and acceptance helps Alex feel more comfortable with his sexual orientation, and James is the direct cause of Alex's sudden safety from bullying. Additionally, unlike in the other three gay themed novels, the gay protagonist, Alex, is also an important influence on his straight brother's masculine identity development. Alex and James's greater emotional closeness gives James the self-confidence he needs to break away from unhealthy friendships and resolve his mistakes with women in the past. He gradually becomes less and less homophobic, thinking that "Things between [James and Nathen], surprisingly enough to James, haven't been weird. Sure, there is that underlying secret

about him and Alex, but as each day goes by, James cares less and less. Maybe it should bother him, but it doesn't" (Wilson 186). He even develops a greater sensitivity to his own and others' feelings and needs, particularly shown in his willingness to make amends with Alice, the ex-girlfriend he had previously used for sex and deemed crazy.

In *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Aristotle's relationship with his brother is very different from the other protagonist's brother relationships, as Ari's brother Bernardo is in prison. His parents don't talk about him, and Ari doesn't even know what his brother's crime was, leading Ari to feel a great deal of desire for the brotherhood he could have had and question his identity. In many ways, however, it is Bernardo's absence that most affects Ari's masculine identity development. Every time Ari feels sad, he thinks about Bernardo and thinks that "Maybe deep down a part of me was always thinking about him. Sometimes, I caught myself spelling out his name" (Sáenz 177-178). He wonders what his life would have been like if his brother had been a part of it: "Maybe he could have taught me stuff about being a guy and what guys should feel and what they should do and how they should act. Maybe I would be happy." Bernardo's love for Ari is made clear in the memory Ari has of walking down the street as a four-year-old, holding hands with his then-fifteen brother, which becomes a recurring dream. Additionally, Ari's father explains that they had sent Ari to live with an aunt while Bernardo's trial was going on because "Your brother loved you, Ari. He did. And he didn't want you to be around. He didn't want you to think of him that way" (Sáenz 282). Yet toward the end of the novel, his parents reveal the truth about his brother's past: he picked up a prostitute who turned out to be a male transvestite and ended up murdering him in the subsequent rage (Sáenz 331). The homophobia behind this violence doesn't deter Ari from attempting to get back in touch with his brother, but when Ari comes to terms with his homosexuality at the end of the

novel, it is unclear whether he will tell his brother about this. If Bernardo had been around when Ari was growing up, Ari could have easily internalized a great deal of this homophobia, and may have struggled even more with his sexuality than he already does. Bernardo is thus incredibly significant to Ari's masculine identity development because of his absence: his absence, and the consequent lack of a hypermasculine model for performing the social codes and rituals of masculinity among his peers (e.g., locker room talk), enabled Ari to distance himself from heteronormative masculinity and be critical of his peers' hypersexualization of women and general stupidity. He was consequently able to form a masculine identity relying more on his differences and independence from these men. Bernardo's incarceration also prevented Ari's exposure to such a homophobic influence, enabling Ari to accept his homosexuality and integrate it into his masculine identity relatively easily.

Though the relationships between gay male protagonists and their brothers are very different, an overarching theme of love and acceptance from protagonists' brothers recurs throughout most of the novels. Brothers play a significant role in masculine identity development in all four of these novels, but the particular role they play depends on the levels of homophobia in the novel's setting: in *Boy Meets Boy* and *Gone, Gone, Gone*, Jay and Todd's acceptance is all that is needed for Paul and Craig, respectively, to form a positive gay identity, so the older brothers play a much smaller role in the protagonists' masculine identity development. Jay simply embodies a form of masculinity different from, but no better or worse than, Paul's masculinity, while Todd initially feminizes Craig because of his sensitivity and youth but ultimately grows to see and treat him as a friend and equal, affirming Craig's masculine independence. In *What They Always Tell Us*, set in a very homophobic society, James's acceptance of Alex's homosexuality is essential to Alex's formation of a masculine identity.

Because of James's acceptance, Alex feels more comfortable being himself, builds confidence, and feels safer in school thanks to his brother's help. Unique to this novel is the importance of the gay protagonist's influence on his straight brother's masculine identity development: Protectiveness for Alex helps James to see that his friendships and previous romances were unhealthy and give him the self-confidence he needs to break away from them, and Alex's struggles with depression and his sexuality give James a greater sensitivity. Interestingly, for the relatively non-homophobic setting of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Bernardo influences Ari's masculine identity development positively through his absence, enabling Ari to form his masculinity independently and with greater self-acceptance than he likely would have with Bernardo's homophobic influence.

Like the overall lack of relationships of gay men with other gay men and the absence of positive representations of effeminate gay men in gay-themed novels, the relationships of gay male protagonists with women tend to be problematic, as revealed by the treatment of mothers and female best friends in these narratives (see Chapter 2). In the genre as a whole, mothers and female best friends tend to be objects from which the gay protagonist must escape, apparently toxic relationships that reinforce negative stereotypes of women and the threat they are assumed to pose to heteronormative masculinity. However, representations of sisters in queer novels seem to be more positive. Four of the gay-themed novels analyzed for this project feature a protagonist with a sister, and *Boy Meets Boy* includes Paul's love interest, Noah's, younger sister. In each of these five novels, the gay characters' sisters play a significant role in their brothers' masculine identity development, but these influences seem to be largely removed from questions of homosexuality, much like Jay's influence on Paul or Todd's influence on Craig. The sisters seem to be universally accepting of their brother's sexuality from the very start of all five novels,

regardless of the levels of homophobia in the novels' settings. Their influence on their brothers' masculine identity development becomes a combination of patronization, protectiveness, and reinforcement of their brothers' independence and masculinity.

The sister in *Rainbow Boys*—Jason's six-year old sister Melissa—has a surprisingly significant influence on her brother considering her age. Jason would have been at least ten years old when Melissa was born. If she contributed to Jason's identity development before the novel, it would likely have been because her birth made him take on greater responsibility in helping to take care of her. Her major influence on his masculine development comes throughout the course of the novel. For instance, Jason protects Melissa from their abusive father and comforts her when their parents are fighting, establishing Jason as his family's protector and even suggesting that he is the father figure in Melissa's life. Later in the novel, Melissa asks what the word gay means, and when Jason asks what she thinks it means, she guesses both that it means "when you're really happy" and "when one boy loves another boy" (Sanchez 161). Jason says that it can mean both of those things, and Melissa climbs onto his lap, saying, "I know! It means when two boys are really happy 'cause they love each other" (Sanchez 161). Jason's relationship with Melissa is strong and serves as a positive representation of a brother-sister relationship in the genre, and through his need to protect her and her acceptance of the concept of homosexuality, she gives him the confidence to confront his father and start the process of accepting his gay identity.

Paul's boyfriend Noah (from *Boy Meets Boy*) is not one of the 12 gay protagonists, but has a significant sister relationship and so has been included in this portion of the analysis. Like the rest of the people in their town, Noah's younger sister Claudia is accepting of her older brother's identity. She is very protective of her brother, telling Paul "Don't hurt him like Pitt did,

okay?” and reminds Noah “Pitt wrecked you. Or have you forgotten?” (Levithan 45). After Paul cheats on Noah, Claudia sees Paul in a store and tells him “If I were bigger [...] I swear I’d beat the crap out of you” (Levithan 136). At the end of the novel, Paul decides to ask Claudia rather than Noah’s parents for permission to take Noah out, and she hesitantly gives it (Levithan 181). But this protectiveness isn’t one-sided: Noah worries about his sister being lonely and spends the night in with her rather than leave her home alone. Though middle-school age Claudia seems to feminize Noah by acting a bit like a stereotypical teenage girl’s father in her protectiveness and threats, Noah is only irritated because her mentioning of his past heartbreak embarrasses him, not because he feels like his little sister shouldn’t be protecting him. Noah reciprocates this protectiveness in a caring and sensitive way, and therefore establishes a masculinity that isn’t threatened by his little sister’s toughness. Their relationship is equal, just like Jay and Paul’s, regardless of gender roles or age.

In Jandy Nelson’s *I’ll Give You the Sun*, Noah and his twin sister Jude have always been extremely close. Noah explains that, when he doesn’t draw himself and Jude together, “I draw us as half-people [...] we’re not only one age, but one complete and whole person” (Nelson 18). Jude is also very protective of Noah. She stands up for him, protects him from bullies, and covers his ears before their father can announce their mother’s death. Noah, however, resents this, admitting that he’s ashamed that his sister, a girl, has to “fight [his] battles for [him]” (Nelson 78) and even resenting that she’s the older twin because “she always makes me feel like I’m her little brother. I hate it” (Nelson 16). Unsurprisingly, the two engage in extreme sibling deidentification. For instance, Noah embraces the image of being around the “revolutionaries” at art school (13) and detests normalcy, while Jude doesn’t want to go to a school with a bunch of “aliens” (16). But over time the two become preoccupied with tearing the other down, initially

over their parents' love and later over admission to art school, and they are driven apart. Both attempt to destroy the other's chances of admission, but it is Jude who succeeds. When Noah doesn't get in, he destroys his art materials and gives up drawing.

Yet Noah and Jude are able to reestablish the closeness they once had. Jude sculpts herself and Noah shoulder-to-shoulder, the pose that they refer to as "NoahandJude" (Nelson 227)—the separate words become one—as they breathe in synchronization. She also continues to protect him until they're seventeen, but does so secretly. Noah has taken to cliff diving and almost drowned once, so Jude spies on him in case she needs to rescue him again. She also knows that he is gay, though he hasn't told her, and that he is still in love with the boy next door who moved away years ago. She secretly orchestrates their reunion to make Noah happy. Jude thus plays an integral role in Noah's masculine identity development: her toughness and protectiveness feminizes him, but her sabotage of his artwork leads him to give up the traditionally feminine activity of drawing, try out for cross-country, and become "normal," thus establishing a more masculine persona. When she brings Brian back into his life, she gives him the confidence and happiness he needs to feel comfortable coming out to his father, and presumably others. Of all of the siblings in these novels combined, Jude is perhaps the most integral to the gay protagonist's masculine identity development.

The sister relationships in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and *Gone, Gone, Gone* are more complex. Lio has many sisters, most of them older and moved out, leaving him with his older sister Jasper and younger sister Michelle. On the other hand, both sisters can be very patronizing, a pattern that reinforces assumptions about the threat that female family members can pose to masculinity. A girl asks Lio on a date, and he seeks out his father for advice, not believing he should go out with her because he's gay. Before he gets the chance

to ask, however, his sisters find out and ignore his doubts. Jasper tells him, “You don’t have to act so uptight just because you’re gay” (Moskowitz 117). In effect, Jasper’s ignorance of Lio’s worries—and her refusal to let him voice them—takes away Lio’s agency and independence. In the meantime, Michelle’s critiques of Lio’s wardrobe and authoritative decisions on what he’ll wear on the date patronize him further, placing him in the role of the sisters’ dress-up doll. Though this scene doesn’t have a significant impact on Lio’s overall masculine development, it places him in a passive position and takes away his voice, ignoring his ethical quandary for their opportunity to have fun. For the rest of the book, however, the sisters seem to respect his independence while showing that they love him. The two are both accepting of Lio’s homosexuality, despite their enthusiasm for his heterosexual first date. Furthermore, Michelle calls Lio right away after a shooting at her school frightens her, and he ditches school to go help her. Later, she holds his hand at the grocery store, which doesn’t bother Lio except that people might assume they’re dating because they look about the same age. Jasper sometimes acts like Lio’s parent, keeping his therapist’s number in her cell phone and expressing her concern for him openly, but this is much less patronizing than the pre-date spectacle, as she tells him that the family is worried about him calmly and respectfully, clearly speaking to him as an equal.

Like Lio’s sisters, Ari’s older twin sisters are presumably accepting of homosexuality. Although Ari isn’t aware of his identity, they attend their Aunt Ophelia’s funeral, which none of Ophelia’s family members except Ari’s immediate family attends because they didn’t approve of her homosexuality. But aside from this assumed acceptance, they seem to feminize Ari and treat him like their child. Ari struggles to form his identity because his sisters are much older than him. He wonders if his habit of feeling sorry for himself “had something to do with my birth order [...]. I didn’t like the fact that I was a pseudo only child. I didn’t know what else to think

of myself. I was an only child without actually being one. That sucked” (13). He explains that the twelve-year age gap between himself and his older sisters meant that “they’d always made me feel like a baby or a toy or a project or a pet [...] Ari, the family mascot” (Sáenz 13). He was always frustrated with the way they patronized him as being “born ‘a little late’” (Sáenz 82). Later, he expresses his anger that “everyone had suggestions as to what was wrong with me and what I should become. Especially my older sisters. Because I was the youngest” (Sáenz 92). The patronizing way Ari’s sisters treat him is much like the treatment Augustus receives from his older sisters in *The Fault in Our Stars*. Like Augustus, Ari’s sisters treat him like a child rather than an independent man, and their inability to relate to him or treat him like an equal contributed greatly to his insecurities and his struggles with his identity. Overall, sisters seem to play as much a role as brothers do in influencing gay protagonists’ masculine identity development, and are accepting as often as, or more often than, brothers are. The representations of sisters in *I’ll Give You the Sun*; *Gone, Gone, Gone*; and *Boy Meets Boy* even offer a potential of embracing femininity and women, rather than the rejection of and escape from femininity that is a major trend in queer novels, and hopefully is something that can be continued in the genre.

### **Conclusion**

Whether represented in cancer novels or novels with gay protagonists, siblings of both genders do have an overall significant influence on the male main character’s masculine identity development. It seems that the major factors in influencing a protagonist’s gender identity development aren’t gender, but rather, the respect and acceptance siblings of either gender show their brothers. However, there are overall differences between genders in how siblings show

these qualities. Brothers typically show their brothers respect, but struggle to make emotional connections to their brothers in expressing their concern and sometimes keep this distance through belittling and feminizing jokes. On the other hand, sisters tend to show a great deal of love and emotional closeness but are more likely to disrespect protagonists through patronizing and even maternal behavior. Sisters are also more likely than brothers to be depicted as automatically or unquestionably accepting their brother despite threats to his masculinity, while brothers' acceptance and respect is more likely to be in doubt at the start of most novels. These differences across gender are relatively minor, however, and instances of healthy brother-brother and brother-sister relationships are both represented, especially in novels with gay themes, where such challenges to heteronormative sibling roles are particularly helpful in fighting back against contemporary gender roles. Though the novels overall reinforce and perpetuate gender roles in their depictions of masculinity when threatened by cancer and/or queerness, it seems that sibling relationships—including non-biological brotherhood and, potentially, sisterhood—are spaces for challenges to heteronormativity and opportunities to represent healthy sibling relationships unrestrained by expectations of heteronormative masculinity.

## Conclusion

### **Threats to Masculinity, the Perpetuation of Heteronormativity, and Hope for Change in Young Adult Novels**

My survey of young adult novels in which masculinity is threatened by a cancer diagnosis or a gay identity revealed that the novels overall reinforce problematic gender roles and expectations. Most noticeably, the novels reinforce dominant cultural views of heteronormative masculinity and femininity. The protagonists in both subgenres and their idealized male love interests, in the gay-themed novels, are predominantly white, middle-class young men, but the threats to their masculinity do not necessarily place them in the same categories within Connell's framework of 'types' of masculinity. Gay men, as Connell explicitly states, inhabit the subordinated position within the hierarchy. Men diagnosed with cancer, on the other hand, aren't so clearly placed. In some ways, they experience marginalization, as they are positioned as hegemonically masculine in their gender (and, in the cases of the four cancer novels analyzed, class and race), and their illness takes away their claim to hegemonic masculinity upon diagnosis. But white, middle-class men diagnosed with cancer were not marginalized before their diagnosis, and won't necessarily be marginalized throughout their illness if they keep their diagnosis hidden or exhibit few side effects in treatment. Moreover, if they recover from the cancer, they are likely able to reclaim hegemonic masculinity. Despite these major differences in the nature of the threats to the characters' masculinity, however, many of the gender roles, expectations, and stereotypes reinforced in the two subgenres were very similar.

One of the most obvious similarities in the representations of heteronormatively masculine main characters was the reliance on athleticism. Protagonists diagnosed with cancer,

gay protagonists, and gay protagonists' love interests are all likely to be athletic in some way, and often are stars in their respective sports. Many characters also demonstrate high levels of stoicism, whether they are unaffected emotionally by their cancer diagnosis or seemingly depressed to a level that they are unable to express their emotions normally. Platonic and sibling relationships between men in the novels are typically emotionally detached and often nonexistent, reinforcing expectations that men maintain strict boundaries with each other to deflect associations with homosexuality. The novels' emphasis on these, and many other, stereotypically masculine traits, both overt and subtle, reinforces a heteronormative ideal of masculinity that often goes unquestioned in the novels examined.

This celebration of heteronormative masculinity is compounded by a pattern of rejecting femininity in both subgenres of novels. A surprisingly high number of characters devalue and sometimes denounce femininity in some way, whether in friendships, romances, or even mother-son relationships. Effeminate men, like Nelson in *Rainbow Boys*, are portrayed negatively, and are never featured as an object of desire. Similarly, female characters are often portrayed in stereotypical and problematic ways. Women's 'femininity' is displayed through vanity and narcissism, (e.g., Mia, *Zac and Mia*); jealousy, (e.g., Ruthie, *Sprout*); and passivity (e.g., Alexis, *The Time Capsule*). Mothers and sisters in both subgenres are prone to patronizing male protagonists and thereby threatening their masculinity, echoing sexist Freudian thought in which men must gain independence from women and femininity in forming their identity. In these novels, Pascoe's "specter of the fag"—perhaps, here, more aptly called the specter of the feminine—seems to be an enormous threat to protagonists' masculine identity development, and the male characters' rejection of femininity only reinforces these standards and fears for contemporary readers.

Despite this overall pattern of gender role reinforcement, however, novels did make significant challenges to heteronormative gender expectations and there were often moments within the narratives that offered great potential for more explicit challenges. John Green and A.J. Betts reveal in their stories the struggles with masculine identity that men dealing with cancer diagnosis and treatments undergo, and though they do little to question the expectations that put them in these crises, the crises themselves offer significant challenges to cultural norms. David Levithan and Hannah Moskowitz use settings where homophobia is no longer prominent to offer models for accepting societies with less strict gender roles. In many of the gay-themed novels, the protagonist seems to embody an alternative masculinity that sometimes offers a balance between masculine and feminine characteristics while still identifying as a man.

Across both subgenres, the addition of sibling relationships revealed positive patterns. Close brother relationships between Paul and Jay (*Boy Meets Boy*) and Craig and Todd (*Gone, Gone, Gone*) offer models for closeness between brothers that don't threaten either character's masculinity. Zac's brother Evan in *Zac and Mia* has a private moment of grief that presents great potential for challenge to the norms that have kept him so distant from the brother he clearly cares about and that prevent him from expressing his emotions. Positive representations of sisters in *Zac and Mia* and *I'll Give You the Sun*, among others, are refreshing exceptions to the pattern of rejecting femininity. Though there are certainly gendered patterns in the representations of sibling relationships, some of them quite problematic, sibling relationships overall seem to be a positive space for challenges to rigid gender roles and also an area with much potential for even greater challenges.

The representations of gender roles and expectations in the YA novels examined for this study did, overall, reinforce unhealthy ideals and stereotypes. Young male readers may very well

integrate these ideals and stereotypes into their own beliefs and place enormous pressure on themselves and others to embody masculine ideals and potentially may have stereotypical views of women. Young women who read these stories may also integrate these representations into their own worldviews and hold brothers and, if they are heterosexual, male partners to these unrealistic standards of masculinity. Yet the challenges posed, and the potential for even greater challenges, are steps in the right direction. If this trend of positive representations of gender roles continues, we may see fewer and fewer problematic gender ideals perpetuated in these, and hopefully other, subgenres of young adult literature—and potentially fewer young readers adopting problematic gender ideals.

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