McQuiston and Quindlen: The Characterization of Lesbian Relationships in Young Adult Novels in the South

by

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Dedication

To all the sapphics in the south who feel the effects of discrimination daily and to sapphic youth who are still trying to figure it out. You're not alone.

And to the librarians, teachers, and other adults fighting against the silencing of LGBTQ+ voices in our public schools.

You all are so strong. Thank you.

Finally, to the activists of the queer community that paved the way so we could make it this far. Your efforts will never be forgotten.

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Abstract

The project aims to explore aspects of sapphic young adult novels set in the southern United States, reflecting real LGBTQ+ experiences in the region. In my thesis, I analyze two novels that delve into crucial themes for queer youth in the southern U.S.: religious trauma, peer and adult relationships, and internalized homophobia. By examining how these elements are portrayed in the chosen novels, I demonstrate their reflection of actual LGBTQ+ experiences in the southern U.S. This representation is vital to combat the isolation felt by queer youth in the region and to cultivate empathy among cisgender heterosexual youth. I focus on *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* by Casey McQuiston and *Her Name in the Sky* by Kelly Quindlen due to their authors' personal ties to the stories and their own upbringing in the southern U.S. This analysis underscores the importance of including minority voices, like those of the LGBTQ+ community, in public-school library collections, where they are often underrepresented.

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Introduction

I realized I was a member of the LGBTQ+ community in my sophomore year of high school. My friend group was composed mostly of fellow members of the community, and I learned a lot about the community through them. All of us identified as cisgender women at the time, so there was lots of knowledge about sapphic love in particular. The term "sapphic" has Greek roots. As described by the University of Wisconsin's LGBTQ+ resource center, it is ". . . a term referring to women who are attracted to women, and is inclusive of lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and queer women and nonbinary people who identify with womanhood" ("Sapphic"). This is the definition of the term "sapphic" that will be referred to from here on out.

Being a community member, I am no stranger to the hardships that must be faced daily. These include hearing bigoted comments directed at me or others like me, getting weird looks for simply holding hands with a lover in public, being told the way I love is going to send me to eternal damnation, having to "come out" and justify my identity to someone else, and having to constantly feel like I'm hiding a part of myself. One thing that I found solace in throughout discovering this part of my identity was literature. Literature allowed an adolescent me to see characters face some of the same things I was going through, see relationships in books that more closely mirrored the ones I had, and gain a greater sense of empathy and connection with the characters I was reading about. Literature was a saving grace for me.

At this age, my biggest resource for books was my high school's library and occasionally the public library in my neighborhood. However, it wasn't so easy to find

very many books that I felt connected to in the ways mentioned above. If books did represent these parts of me, the representation typically came in the form of side characters or harmful stereotypes. The type of literature I sought out for comfort and understanding myself better was hard to come by.

Since coming out of adolescence and becoming more comfortable with every part of myself, I have begun to seek comfort in literature in other ways. However, I can't help but think about how many sapphic teens may be facing the same circumstances I was in. Unfortunately, homophobia seems to run more rampant in the south, where I spent my teenage years. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "homophobia" as, "Hostility towards, prejudice against, or (less commonly) fear of homosexual people or homosexuality" ("Homophobia"). Unfortunately, I still experience the effects of homophobia today, but I am more equipped to deal with it than a teenager who is already hyperaware of their image.

My experiences with homophobia are not rare; most of my friends and most queer strangers I have talked to have stories about the effects homophobia has had on them. The examples of daily struggles listed above are only some of the ways homophobia can present itself. It's common knowledge that adolescents spend most of their time in school, so I took to looking into the rates of homophobia in school climates specifically. Students attending schools in the south generally experience the most hostile school climates, being least likely to have LGBTQ+-related resources and supports, being most likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression, being most likely to experience physical assault based on sexual orientation, being most likely to experience verbal

harassment and physical assault based on gender expression, and having the least amount of very or somewhat supportive administration (Kosciw et al. 101-103). Essentially, a public school in the southern United States is the last place you want to be as a queer adolescent in the country.

While it's true that the southern United States has witnessed a trend of growing acceptance for homosexuality amongst individuals in the past decade, it still has high rates of negative beliefs about the LGBTQ+ community, especially compared to other regions of the country. The Pew Research Center conducted their latest Religious Landscape Study in 2014. This study was conducted once before in 2007 and both times showed a margin of error of less than one percentage point ("About the Religious Landscape Study"). It was conducted as an online questionnaire to adults across America. The full sample size was over 35,000 people, 12,566 of them belonging to the southern region of the United States. The study found that the southern United States is highly religious, having the highest percentage of the population that are absolutely certain in the existence of God and with 76% of the population identifying as Christian ("Adults in the South"). Additionally, of the 12,566 individuals questioned in the southern United States, 37 percent of them said that homosexuality should be discouraged and 46 percent of them opposed or strongly opposed same-sex marriage. Both statistics were the highest of the four regions surveyed.

In fact, for regions with higher amounts of religious certainty, there were elevated rates of disapproval for homosexuality and same-sex marriage. While no direct causation can be proved from this information alone, it's true that religion does play a role in the

way people view sexuality. In my experience, many people back up their homophobic beliefs with reasoning of their religion's beliefs or religious textual evidence. There are several passages in both the Old and New testaments of the bible that are commonly used as arguments against homosexuality, such as Leviticus 18-22: "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable" (*New International Version*, Lev. 18-22). The official teaching of the Catholic church states that homosexuality should not be expressed. Their official catechism states, "They [homosexual acts] are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved" ("Catechism"). Religion plays a large role in the overall culture of the southern United States, and consequently the behavior towards homosexuality in the region.

Homophobia can be projected towards others, but it can also be projected onto oneself; this is known as internalised homophobia. In The Rainbow Project's definition of internalised homophobia, they state, "Individuals experiencing internalised homophobia may experience feelings of shame, embarrassment, anger, exclusion, and hopelessness" ("Internalised Homophobia"). Growing up, members of the LGBTQ+ community may be socialized into thinking that anything other than heterosexuality is wrong or immoral ("Internalised Homophobia"). These feelings may come from an angle of growing up in a religious household where homosexuality was talked down on and considered a sin, but it may also come from simply living in the southern United States where the very act of homophobia is rooted in the politics of the region. Of the midwest,

northeast, south, and west, the southern United States has the smallest percentage of states with laws protecting the LGBTQ+ community from discrimination in general employment, public employment, government employment, and private employment (Cramer et al. 63). The south also has the smallest percentage of states with laws protecting the LGBTQ+ community from discrimination in housing practices and denial of access to public accommodations based on sexual orientation (Cramer et al. 63). Structuralized stigma has effects on the mental wellbeing of the LBGTQ+ community. According to an article published in the *Current Directions in Psychological Science* journal, "The prevalence of psychiatric disorders was significantly higher among LGB adults living in states with policies that did not confer protection to gays and lesbians [such as anti-discrimination policies], compared with LGB individuals living in states with protective policies" (Hatzenbuehler 128). Living in the south where homophobia, homophobic religious ideas, and lack of protection for homosexuals politically is a big issue can foster homophobia towards others or the self.

Living in such a culture has direct effects on the mental health of queer youth. According to a study done by Jae Puckett et al. for the *Journal of Homosexuality*, experiences of psychological maltreatment and verbal abuse from caregivers are common among queer youth living in the southern United States (Puckett et al. 707). Their study found that such experiences negatively affect mental health and wellbeing (Puckett et al. 707). In addition to family mistreatment, rejection from peers was an indicator of negative mental wellbeing and higher risk of suicide, which is also more common in the southern United States where prejudice against members of the LGBTQ+ community is

more prevalent (Puckett et al. 708). Although homophobia is widespread across the country, it is more highly concentrated in the south, adding on more stressors and more need for support for members of the LGBTQ+ community living in this region. As indicated by the Puckett et al. study, social support is a strong factor in the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth (Puckett et al. 700); the more they feel seen and heard, the less likely they are to experience such strong effects of these mental health issues. Even if the likelihood is diminished by a small amount, this amount may make all the difference for an LGBTQ+ individual.

Michael Cart, a nationally recognized expert on young adult literature, says it best. When talking about the importance of representation in the young adult genre, he states,

> Thus, to see oneself reflected in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the blessed assurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity.
>
> Still another value of young adult literature is its capacity for fostering, in its readers, understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives – exterior and interior – of individuals who are unlike the reader (Cart).

In understanding his words, one can see that literature has the power to make readers feel less alien, but also foster empathy for those different from them. Research shows that what he says is true; reading does have a positive impact on empathy (Mumper and Gerrig 114). When engaging with a specific style of narration common in the fiction genre, readers engage in cognitive and emotional processes that boost empathy (Mumper and Gerrig 110). While the effects on empathy through reading are small, they are consistently positive effects.

Like myself, many queer youths may find their school's library to be the easiest method of accessing books; up until the age of sixteen in the United States, youth are not legally allowed to drive, so getting to the library in a building they must go to almost every day can be easier than asking a parent or guardian to take them somewhere additional. Recently, there's been a spotlight on schoolbook banning, particularly in the southern United States. PEN America, a nonprofit organization centered around freedom of expression in literature, recorded "more book bans during the fall 2022 semester than in each of the two prior semesters" (Meehan et al.). 26% of the banned titles include LGBTQ+ characters or themes. Yet, a study by The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law estimates that 1,994,000 youth ages 13-17 in the United States identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Conron 1).

More specifically, these books bannings seem most prominently to appear in the Southeastern or South-Central United States, with the top five states consisting of Texas, Florida, Missouri, Utah, and South Carolina, in that order (Meehan et al.). In banning these books, school districts may be taking away important narratives from today's adolescents in the time of their lives when they may need them the most.

While there has been much discussion surrounding book banning and LGBTQ+ literature, both as affected by each other and as separate topics, there has been significantly less discussion for the "L" of LGBTQ+, particularly concerning the area of young adult literature. Most research consists of talking about specific aspects of the experience of being a lesbian, namely the process of coming out, but I was unable to find an adequate amount of research focusing on the elements of sapphic stories in young

adult literature, particularly those set in the southern United States. We now know that reading has a positive effect on empathy levels, that homophobia is a large problem in the south, and that book banning in the south primarily targets books showcasing LGBTQ+ stories.

With already little representation available for sapphic characters in the south, it's important to recognize how the stories that are available are important, what elements of the sapphic experience in the south they expose their readers to, and how they can make readers who see themselves in the characters feel less alone and foster empathy in readers who may have never considered a point of view similar to the characters. Our youth should have easy access to these stories to promote a more understanding sense of community among peers, making schools feel safer and increasing levels of social support.

One of the books I will analyze is *Her Name in the Sky. Her Name in the Sky* is a young adult novel centered around two female best friends who fall in love in southern Louisiana while attending a Catholic school. The novel has sold over 30,000 copies all over the world and is a very well-known title within the sapphic community. The book was published in 2014 and gives great exposure to themes such as cultural factors of being a lesbian growing up in the southern United States and internalised homophobia. Another title of Quindlen's, *Late to the Party,* was challenged by northeastern Texas school boards in December 2021. It is currently undergoing investigation.

The other book I will analyze is *I Kissed Shara Wheeler,* a young adult novel about a teenage girl who runs away shortly after kissing the lead female character. The

author of the novel, Casey McQuiston, is known for their two other highly successful LGBTQ+ stories – *Red, White, & Royal Blue* published on May 14, 2019, and *One Last Stop* published on June 1, 2021. The former of the two was recently adapted into an Amazon Prime film. *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* centers around our main character's search for the girl who kissed her and ran and coping with her feelings about the situation. This novel contains many of the same themes as *Her Name in the Sky*, but they are handled differently. This book was published in 2022.

My selection for young adult sapphic novels set in the southern United States was narrow, but there are a few reasons I picked *Her Name in the Sky* and *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* ultimately. Both authors have direct experience with growing up queer in the southern United States. In fact, *Her Name in the Sky* is based on Quindlen's personal coming out journey (Quindlen), and Casey McQuiston is queer and nonbinary and grew up in the deep south in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Because the authors have direct experience with the stories they're writing, this can make for a more emotionally accurate and emotionally impactful narrative. It's harder to write off what someone is saying about the difficulties of the queer experience when they've experienced it directly. *Her Name in the Sky* stood out to me because it was based on Quindlen's personal coming out journey, but also because of its emphasis on religion. As mentioned above, religion plays a large role in the culture of the southern United States, and it often contributes to feelings of homophobia. *Her Name in the Sky* clearly illustrates the culture of the deep south. *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* addresses some of the issues as *Her Name in the Sky*, but while Quindlen's book shows the process of accepting oneself, *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* shows

the experience of someone who is comfortable in their sexuality, but still faces the discrimination typical of the southern culture. *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* is also unique in that the protagonist did not grow up in the south. Through her, we get the perspective of someone who moved from a more accepting environment to the deep south, clearly showcasing a juxtaposition in the way the LGBTQ+ community is treated in other regions of the country as compared to the south.

Both novels showcase important aspects of the sapphic experience in the south. I will analyze scenes that give readers an insight into religious trauma, peer acceptance and/or rejection, relationships with adults in respect to queer identity, and internalised homophobia. Both novels expose these aspects of life to readers in a different way and, based on what is known about the effect of literature on the feelings of belonging and empathy, make them feel less alone or help them to understand perspectives different from their own, fostering a stronger sense of understanding, and therefore acceptance, of the sapphics in the LGBTQ+ community.

I Kissed Shara Wheeler

I Kissed Shara Wheeler centers around Chloe Green, a teenager living with her two moms in the heart of the south – Alabama. Chloe did not always grow up in the south. Her moms moved her there from a much more liberal neighborhood in southern California. While Chloe is confident in her identity, a lot of her friends around her refuse to display their queer identities in fear of the side effects that may come with living in the deep south. The love interest of the novel, Shara Wheeler, whose name is mentioned in the title, grapples with coming to terms with her identity so much that she runs away.

Throughout the novel, Shara is described as the golden girl; she has the best grades, she's the nicest human being alive, and she's the prettiest girl living in the fictional town of False Beach, Alabama. However, when she finds out she doesn't get into Harvard like everyone expected her to, she runs away.

Not only does she not get into Harvard, but she also lies about getting in in the first place because not getting into Harvard goes against the image of the perfect Shara Wheeler that False Beach knows and loves. Not getting into Harvard isn't the only thing Shara lies about; she lies to herself about her identity. After Chloe finally finds Shara at the marina on her parents' boat, she realizes that Shara has feelings for her, but Shara won't admit to it, insisting that her kissing Chloe and her act before that was all just a game to get Chloe to fall for her to distract her so that Shara could snatch the valedictorian title for herself. Not believing a word of this, Chloe asks Shara, "Then why do you want me to kiss you right now?" (McQuiston 230). Shara denies this and Chloe starts to pull away, but Shara brings her right back in, smashing their lips together for their second kiss. After they pull away, Chloe pushes Shara into the lake and walks off feeling victorious, leaving Shara alone.

A few days later, Shara goes live on Instagram, telling the truth to nearly everyone in False Beach about not getting into Harvard. Her live soon takes a quick turn. ". . . that was back when I thought I knew what all of my lies were and why I had to tell them. It hadn't really occurred to me that I was lying to myself too" (McQuiston 246). It seems that Shara spent the last few days thinking about everything that happened with Chloe and grappling with the fact that Chloe was right, Shara has feelings for her. Shara

says, “I think maybe I needed so many secrets to keep this one locked up, and now that it’s not locked up anymore, I don’t need the rest” (McQuiston 246). While not to the most extreme extent it could be, Shara was facing a bit of internalised homophobia here. She denied her sexual orientation, over-achieved as a bid for acceptance, and attempted to be seen as heterosexual (by dating the star football player), all of which are valid examples of internalised homophobia (“Internalised Homophobia”).

Because of the story being from Chloe’s point of view and the revelation of Shara’s sexuality happening so late in the novel, readers do not get a chance to see very fleshed out peer reactions to Shara’s sexuality. However, Chloe illustrates the acceptance and/or rejection of her peers throughout the book. We see this in Chloe’s relationship with her friends, in her relationships with the community of False Beach, and in her friends’ relationship with the community. In a description of one of her close friends, Benjy, who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community to a select group of people, Chloe reflects on the overall relationship between social status and being gay at Willowgrove Christian Academy, one of the primary settings of our story. Chloe says, “Being super talented exempts him from a certain amount of bullying, but the order of Willowgrove operations states that being super gay, even if you haven’t actually told anyone that you are, cancels a lot of that out” (McQuiston 62). In a southern school like Willowgrove, your sexuality is a bigger defining factor of your social status than your personality, in the worst way.

There’s another comment made about the general attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community in False Beach after Chloe has a conversation with Smith, the aforementioned

star football player, about how attractive she finds Shara. Chloe says, “Usually the only people in False Beach who are this cool about her being queer are other queer people” (McQuiston 93). This implies that, outside of her small friend group of fellow queer youth, Chloe has experienced homophobia from most of the population of False Beach, speaking to the overall attitude that the town holds towards the LGBTQ+ community. This is not an uncommon ideology for small towns in the southern United States. Rural Americans in towns of less than 250,000 people or more are more likely to be against progression of LGBTQ+ rights, particularly against same-sex marriage (Wuthnow 129). Readers may find themselves identifying with these issues, and may feel glad to see them brought into light. Alternatively, it may open the eyes of some that are part of the problem or neutral to it.

The other children are not the only ones responsible for making the queer youth of False Beach feel the way they feel about their identities. The adults play a role in this community's discriminatory attitude too. In chapter five of the novel, readers learn that Willowgrove makes teachers sign a morality clause banning drinking, expressing political opinions, and being homosexual (McQuiston 63). While there may be an exception or two, most adults with an accepting view of homosexuality would not sign a clause that treats homosexuality like a negative thing. Adults working at Willowgrove Christian Academy, where students that attend here spend most of their time, have negative attitudes towards homosexuality.

In addition to the morality clause they must sign, Chloe talks to her mom about the contents of mandatory bible class, which, in her eyes, consists of the baseball coach

informing classes of seniors every day that ". . . premarital sex is a sin and homosexuals are an abomination" (McQuiston 98). While this is a biased and casual description of what goes on in the mandatory bible class, the value of this statement is that it is from Chloe's eyes – a member of the LGBTQ+ youth of Willowgrove. This is the message she gets from this class, so it's most likely the message that others in the community of her same age get from the class as well, a very negative message to digest, especially when these students are already dealing with the negative stigma surrounding homosexuality in other aspects of daily life in False Beach.

Of course, Willowgrove is a Christian school, so religious trauma cannot be ignored when it comes to discussion of this novel. McQuiston even warns readers of this religious trauma in a letter to the reader placed before the start of the book. Several times throughout the book, Chloe mocks the homophobic teachings of the Christians at Willowgrove academy. Before Willowgrove, Chloe had never been exposed to church. When going into detail about some of the sermons she has heard at Willowgrove, she talks about a time when her Spanish teacher ". . . got up with an easel pad, drew a diagram of two stick men on a deserted island, and told them [the class] the fact that humanity would go extinct on that island was proof God doesn't want anyone to be gay" (McQuiston 109). While Chloe reveals such things with a sarcastic tone and McQuiston uses humorous writing to showcase some of these ideas, they are not far behind ideas that many Christians are taught in the conservative southern United States. McQuiston's credibility as someone who grew up in the deep south can further back up the accuracy of the existence of these ideas.

When thinking of her friend Georgia in the context of being queer in False Beach, Chloe specifically mentions her religion. McQuiston writes, “It’s not as simple for Georgia as it is for Chloe, being queer. Georgia isn’t sure how her parents will take it, much less her entire extended Southern Baptist family” (McQuiston 165). The use of the term “much less” here and the choice of “Southern Baptist” as the adjective implies that because of their faith, Georgia’s extended family may have an extremely hard time accepting her queer identity.

I Kissed Shara Wheeler showcases very real elements of the southern queer experience in an often-humorous tone. This approach is easy for teenagers to digest and still exposes them to a very real southern queer youth narrative, having the ability to make queer readers feel less alone and open the eyes of youth who may not experience the south through a queer lens.

Her Name in the Sky

Her Name in the Sky centers around a teenage girl, Hannah Eaden, as she discovers that she has feelings for her best friend, Baker Hadley, in contrast to everything she’s learned growing up in her Catholic community in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Over the novel, readers see Hannah struggle with religious trauma, internalised homophobia, peer rejection and acceptance, and relationships with supportive and unsupportive adult figures. Eventually, Hannah comes around to accepting herself, but not before going through so much turmoil. *Her Name in the Sky* tackles complex character relationships from the perspective of a sapphic youth who grew up in a community where queer love is unacceptable. Despite all this, readers get to see Hannah eventually triumph, spreading a

positive message of self-acceptance to those who may be in similar shoes at the time of reading the novel.

As mentioned above, *Her Name in the Sky* is based on Quindlen's own coming out experience. The experience still follows her today, as "she is on the leadership team for a non-profit for Catholic parents with LGBTQ children and is very passionate about the intersection of queerness and faith" ("About the author"). She also organizes retreats and safe spaces for Catholic LGBTQ+ teens. Quindlen wrote *Her Name in the Sky* intending to provide representation for those in the same or similar positions to herself or Hannah. On her website, Quindlen states, "I believe deeply that young people deserve to see themselves reflected on the page and I want my books to feel like a sanctuary for queer teens" (Quindlen). Because this book was based on Quindlen's real experience, it adds more to the fact that the attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community it expresses is a very real thing. In the book, Quindlen showcases aspects of religious trauma, peer relationships with LGBTQ+ youth, adult relationships with LGBTQ+ youth, and internalised homophobia that are important elements of the queer southern journey.

Readers see internalised homophobia early in the story. On page seventy one of this 402-page novel, Hannah begins her imagery of comparing her journey with sexuality to different levels of filth. "Then they exist in silence, and Hannah feels like they are two little kids sitting in a mud puddle, unsure of how this submersion feels, unsure of whether they'll ever be clean again" (Quindlen 71). This statement refers to Hannah and Baker's situation the morning after they kissed at a party. The mud puddle represents the situation they are in, the uncertainty their own confusion, and the statement of "whether they'll

ever be clean again" implies that they're dirty, that what they've done is dirty and there is potentially no coming back from it. To Hannah, their kiss feels like a sin and her feelings, despite her being unable to pinpoint what they were at the time, feel wrong. By comparing her kissing Baker to something she may never be clean from, Hannah is clearly experiencing the shame, embarrassment, and hopelessness that can come with internalised homophobia. Of course, internalised homophobia may look different for everyone, and we see that with Baker.

"I'm dating a boy right now to try and make everything better but it's not working, it's nto working, and now I'm ruining my group of best friends too" (Quindlen 301). This is a line in an email that Baker sent to Ms. Carpenter, one of the supportive adults in the girls' lives. She's realized her feelings for Hannah, but she is still trying to deny them, even going so far as to date one of their best friends that has real feelings for her in hopes of changing her feelings for Hannah, or at least not letting anyone see her true feelings. Often, individuals experiencing internalised homophobia will try to do what they think to be right and partake in heterosexual romance. It is also mentioned in the letter and talked about throughout the story that Baker has been drinking more than is typical of her. It also seems that she's experiencing symptoms of depression, with her appetite being small and seemingly losing interest in the things she usually enjoys. Baker is feeling hatred towards herself, drinking more often, not eating, spending a lot more time alone, and not responding to her friends as much. We know that depression has a positive correlation with internalised homophobia (Yolaç and Meriç 6), and that internalised homophobia can consist of feeling disgust with oneself, attempting to hide

one's identity, and drinking more often ("Internalised Homophobia"). Baker is experiencing a very different form of internalised homophobia than Hannah, but it just gives readers one more perspective to understand and/or relate to.

In addition to internalised homophobia, *Her Name in the Sky* focuses heavily on religious trauma in relation to the southern queer journey. As mentioned above, all our main characters grew up in a Catholic community in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and even attend a Catholic school. "There are so many people who make me hate myself,. . . who make me feel ashamed. They claim to know what you want. They say I'm turning away from you if I fall in love with a girl. Is it true?" (Quindlen 287). This is in one of the many conversations that Hannah has with God throughout the novel. This one is a hypothetical conversation as opposed to her actual prayers the readers so often get to see, but a very powerful scene. Hannah has been raised to fear God should she sin, and she feels like her feelings for Baker are a sin, so she is scared.

Religious trauma is often an effect of spiritual abuse. Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond define spiritual abuse as

> . . . coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences SA as a deeply emotional personal attack.
>
> This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behavior, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position and isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.

While spiritual abuse can come in more severe shapes and forms, it's true that Father Simon, the priest of the Catholic school that Hannah and her friends attend, is

made out to be the villain in the novel and often the way he treats the students can fall into this category. He often uses the bible as a weapon and uses his status as priest to scare the students into making what he deems to be the correct decision. After he finds out that Hannah is sapphic (Quindlen 259), he often tries to convince her that it is a sin and that it is something that she can overcome. He treats her actions as filthy and tries multiple times to get her to repent.

In a study on the relationship between spiritual abuse and religious trauma, a team of researchers found that both religious trauma and spiritual abuse were positively correlated with depression (Ellis et al. 227), which readers see Hannah and Baker struggle with throughout the book. Additionally, when the novel reaches the climax and Baker and Hannah finally admit their feelings for each other, Baker tells Hannah that she needs time to think before they can pursue a relationship. Baker needs time to become comfortable with herself, to pull away from the ideas that she was taught her whole life, a lasting effect of the religious trauma she is now unraveling. While it's true that religious trauma can stem from anywhere, it is also true that religion plays a large role in the culture of the southern United States, so the conclusion can be drawn that the setting here is still extremely important.

It's been noted several times that Hannah and Baker were raised in a Catholic community. Therefore, not only the two of them are Catholic, but most everyone around them. This influenced Hannah and Baker's peers' attitudes towards homosexuality and thus, their peers' attitudes towards them after they came out. In the courtyard, after Baker anonymously sends the e-mail to Ms. Carpenter, Michelle, one of the smaller antagonists

in the story, makes a snide comment about Baker's (at the time, only suspected) sexuality. She says, "'You're supposed to be our president, remember?. . . You're not supposed to go getting our favorite teacher fired. Or, you know, decide to be a lesbian'" (Quindlen 294). Her choice of words here implies that being a lesbian is not something a senior president should be doing, that it's a negative trait. Her usage of the word "decide" also makes it out to seem that Baker's sexuality is something she chose – in Michelle's opinion, the wrong choice. This comment was homophobic in nature, as it implied not only that Baker was not fit to be president because of her sexuality, but also that her sexuality is a choice, a common misconception for homophobic thoughts despite the known knowledge now that it is not a choice (Groneberg and Funke 201).

Along with Michelle, readers see a general homophobic attitude in the community with Hannah and Baker's peers in several instances in the book. They typically come in the form of small written comments by Quindlen that make it clear what the consensus is on homosexuals. Readers can especially see this after Hannah takes the blow for Baker's email, getting the school-favorite Ms. Carpenter fired. As she's sitting at a lunch table with her sister, Joanie, her only ally at the time, Hannah makes eye contact with a group of guys. Quindlen writes, "As she watches, Bradford leans into the center of the table and says something that makes all the guys roar with laughter" (Quindlen 318). It's implied they're making fun of Hannah for her recent coming out, as this is the main ammunition her peers have against her.

Additionally, the following morning, we're told that Hannah finds a demeaning note in her locker. Quindlen writes, "On Tuesday morning, when Hannah opens her

locker, a crumpled note falls out" (Quindlen 319). The note reads "Nice going lesbeaux." This is a teenager's spelling take on the word "lesbo", with the "o" in many words being replaced with "eaux" in an attempt to sound cooler. "Lesbo" originated in 1931 and is now an often derogatory and offensive term for lesbian ("Lesbo"). Clearly, whoever placed the note in Hannah's locker (presumably Michelle or another girl) chose this word with negative intentions, shaming Hannah for her sexuality.

While readers may see many negative attitudes towards homosexuality, they may also find positive ones in the pages of this novel. The first person that Hannah tells the full story to about everything going on between her and Baker is Joanie. Upon telling her sister, Hannah feels an immense fear, letting readers know just how scary it can be for someone in her situation to come out about their sexuality. Coming out makes it real. It also means you must prepare for potential judgement, shame, or even to lose long-lasting relationships in your life. Quindlen writes, "Hannah's face sears with heat. Her whole body revs up for danger, her primal instincts kicking into gear like those of a trapped animal. She can hear her heart pounding in her head" (Quindlen 262). Hannah is ready for the worst; it's almost what she expects. Instead what she gets is her sister's supportive response: "'Why would it be weird?'" (Quindlen 263). Hannah begins to cry and Joanie comforts her. After this, they continue into normal conversation about the situation, almost as if they're two teenage girls talking about boy drama. Joanie is treating Hannah like it is completely normal.

Even though it comes around the conclusion, Hannah also finds support in her and Baker's group of friends. In fact, their shunning of her and anger with her had throughout

the novel had nothing to do with her sexuality. For Clay, it was because he was jealous – he didn't want Baker to love Hannah because he had feelings for her, but he knew her feelings for Hannah were undeniable. Luke was upset because of a comment she made that separated his long-term relationship with Joanie. Finally, Wally was upset because Hannah played with his feelings. He had real feelings for her and, instead of confiding in him, she chose to pretend to have romantic feelings for him in a similar way to how Baker chose to pretend to have romantic feelings for Clay. When Hannah goes to apologize to Clay near the end of the novel, he commends her for her bravery and reveals that he saw her and Baker kissing for the first time at a beach party. He says, "It freaked me out. . . Not because I thought it was bad, or wrong, or any of that shit, but because it made sense. It made so much sense" (Quindlen 375). He reassures her that his negative feelings at the time had nothing to do with the fact that it was two girls kissing, but that it was Baker and Hannah kissing. This upset him because of his feelings for Baker, not because of any held homophobic opinions.

However, peer opinions aren't the only ones that matter to an adolescent. They are often swayed and influenced by the adults in their lives. One of the biggest examples of negative adult influence we see throughout the novel is Father Simon, the official priest for Willowgrove. He consistently has negative things to say about homosexuality. He says that it's wrong and that it's a sin – something you can repent from. He tries several times to get Hannah to atone for her sins so that she can be saved, insisting that her love for the same sex is something of the devil. He is not too shy to proclaim his homophobic views in front of young adolescents. On pages 281-282 of the novel, he has

a whole spiel about how homosexual marriage is not natural and same-sex attraction is separating people from God and that it's not too late to return to salvation. These words stick with Hannah and her friends.

Later that night, Hannah goes to confront Baker at her home to ask why she isn't speaking to her. Baker says that she wants to, but that everything is too complicated and her and Hannah having a relationship is not a possibility. As her evidence, she uses Father Simon's words. She cries, "'You heard Father Simon today. You heard what he said about people like us" (Quindlen 285). It's clear that Baker internalised his words, much as she has done the entirety of her life to get her to this point of internalised homophobia.

Father Simon tends to make it seem like Hannah and Baker are sick or there is something wrong with them. After Hannah takes the fall for the e-mail, she is called to the office. In there are Mrs. Shackleford, the school principal, Mr. Manceau, Father Simon, Ms. Carpenter, and Hannah's parents. After some conversation, Father Simon addresses Hannah's parents. He says, "'Tom, Anne, please let me be clear. . . Every person has her own burdens- every disciple of Christ has her own Cross to carry- and same-sex attraction is a particularly difficult one. . . Same-sex attraction is something she can move past and heal from'" (Quindlen 304). He even goes so far as to call same-sex attraction a disorder, implying that Hannah has a disorder. This all happens with Hannah sitting right there in the room listening. We know that, even if this was not his intention, words do hold power, and it's possible that Hannah left the room having doubts about

herself once again. Even if she didn't, it isn't fun to hear someone call the way you love, which you're already insecure about in the first place, a disorder.

Luckily, Hannah has Ms. Carpenter, who serves as a positive contrast to Father Simon. Ms. Carpenter seems to be a supportive figure throughout the novel. She even storms out after Father Simon gives his sermon on how homosexual marriage and love is unnatural, knocking over some Willowgrove pamphlets in the process (Quindlen 282). After the meeting in the office, despite getting fired because of her support for the girl who emailed her about "struggling" with same-sex attraction, Ms. Carpenter makes sure to let Hannah know that she is proud of her (Quindlen 308). Her words towards the end of the novel even found their place etched onto the back of the book, proudly displayed for readers to see. She says, "'Love ultimately wins, Hannah. Love ultimately saves" (Quindlen 368). This is after she gives Hannah reassurance that her love does not go against God's wishes.

In addition to Ms. Carpenter, Hannah's parents are supportive figures in her life. After they get home from the office meeting, Hannah and her mother are alone in the kitchen. They have a conversation about the elephant in the room, and Hannah asks about the content of the email. The words that reveal one girl's love for another. She asks if they're okay. Her mother is silent for a moment before asking for time, and Hannah starts to cry. Hearing her daughter's sobs, her mother pulls her into a hug and says, "'It's okay. I love you. Dad and I love you. Nothing could ever change that'" (Quindlen 312). This is the first time we get to really hear her parents' thoughts on the matter, and her mother is being supportive. Like Ms. Carpenter, she also reassures her that she has done nothing

wrong and that her love isn't going against God. Later on, after Hannah apologizes for being the way that she is, her mother tells her that "'God knew exactly what He was doing when He created'" her (Quindlen 356).

Her father also shows his support in less direct ways. In the hospital, when Father Simon keeps pressing Hannah to atone for her sins, it is Hannah's father that cuts him off. He says, "'Stand down!. . . Stand down, man!. . . I respect your vocation. . . but I will not let you speak to my child like this-'" (Quindlen 345). While he never directly tells Hannah of his support in ways that her mother does, it's clear he has love for his daughter and accepts all parts of her after he shuts down Father Simon from trying to "save" her from herself.

Her Name in the Sky allows readers to experience what it is like to grow up in a southern Catholic community, where homophobic ideals are common. Quindlen shows what internalised homophobia, peer relationships, adult relationships, and religious trauma may look like in this setting using Hannah and her friends' story inspired by her own true experiences.

Conclusion

We now know that reading, especially fiction, can foster a sense of empathy and encourage understanding of members of an outgroup (Citaion here). Positive portrayals of outgroups in narrative equate to positive portrayals of outgroups in real scenarios and vice versa for negative portrayals of outgroups. Using this knowledge, I argue that the more we expose our adolescents to the voices of minorities, particularly sapphics in this case, the more they will foster a sense of empathy.

We also know that the southern United States has the most hostile school climates for queer youth (Kosciw et al. 101-103), the highest rates of people who think homosexuality should be discouraged ("Adults in the South"), the highest rates of people who oppose same-sex marriage ("Adults in the South"), the least number of laws protecting the queer community from discrimination (Cramer et al. 63), and the least amount of resources for the queer community.

I Kissed Shara Wheeler and *Her Name in the Sky* show very real elements of the queer adolescent experience in the southern United States. They include narrative experiences of internalised homophobia, peer rejection and acceptance, rejection and acceptance of adults, and religious trauma, both to their own degree for each element and handling the situation in their own tone. Both authors are queer and grew up in the south, so their experiences are even more likely to be an accurate representation of some of the hardships queer youth in the region may go through.

I Kissed Shara Wheeler deals with these topics in a more humorous tone. We see the main love interest, Shara, try to quell her homosexual attraction and keep it at bay in fear of ruining her perfect image. We also see Chloe, our protagonist, fight against the homophobic agenda of her school and talk about the experience of being a queer youth in the south with her friends who grew up in the community. *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* shines for its ability to highlight the queer experience in the south without making it the main focal point of the book, thus normalizing it. It is very prominent in the story, but it is also not the entire focus, sending the message that while queer youth are normal teenagers, they have aspects of their lives that are different than their peers because of homophobia.

Her Name in the Sky takes a more serious and prose-like approach to the queer experience. Unlike Chloe, our protagonist in *I Kissed Shara Wheeler,* Hannah is only freshly discovering her identity. Readers get to walk through this experience with her and see how religious trauma and internalised homophobia shapes this part of her life. We also get to see how this journey was shaped and further shaped her relationships with her peers and the adults in her life, such as her teachers and parents.

Although both books showed negative traits of the queer experience in the southern United States, they also had the main characters showcase their love for their hometowns in the end of the novels. *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* ends with Chloe realizing that False Beach is a part of her just as much as California is a part of her, and *Her Name in the Sky* ends with Hannah and her group of friends riding off into the sunset on their bikes as they recreate and reflect on the happy memories they've shared in Baton Rouge. These books are not trying to paint the south out to be some evil, homophobic place. Instead, they're trying to open people's minds to experiences that the LGBTQ+ community may go through living in the region. Books with this narrative should be included on our school's library shelves – teaching our queer kids that they're not alone and sharing new perspectives with those who have not experienced the elements of the queer youth journey as showcased in these novels.

One thing that both books had in common is that there was an attempt to suppress homosexuality in each of them. Even though homosexuality was regarded as wrong and something that can be changed, it didn't stop our main characters, and, in Shara's case, some of their friends from identifying as homosexual. In fact, the suppression in their

communities only made it worse for them as they were treated as if they were wrong and were unable to find resources or learn anything about these parts of their identity. If suppressing and shunning homosexuality didn't help in Chloe and Shara's worlds, it certainly won't help in our real world. The censorship of same-sex attracted voices is not going to stop queer youth from eventually discovering their queer identity. Instead, it's only going to make the experience harder for them when they inevitably do. Fictional novels like these and those specifically being targeted are useful resources for these kids, and they should remain or be placed onto public school library shelves.

As a queer teenager living in the south, literature was something that helped me when I was able to find representation. However, it was hard to find it on my public-school shelves, even though this was the easiest way for me to gain access to such stories. I believe that if I had access to more stories like this at this age, I would've come to accept myself a lot faster and gained a better understanding of what it means to be a part of this community. Young adolescents should be able to have the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the pages of a novel and feel less alone, and we should eagerly jump at the opportunity to expose adolescents to walks of life unlike their own in hopes of fostering a more empathetic community.

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