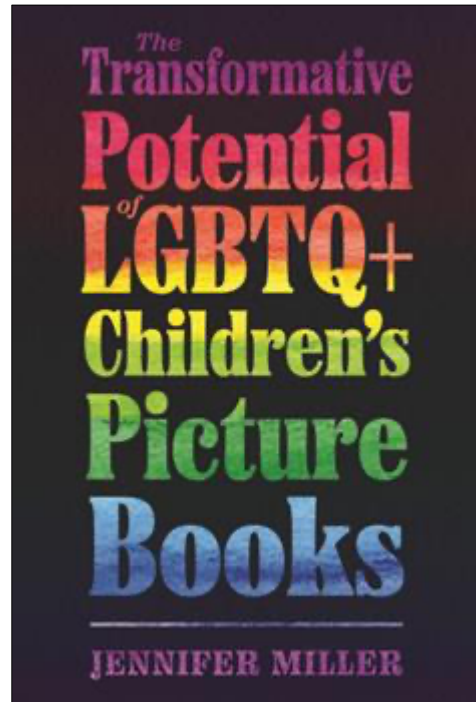


Jennifer Miller, **The Transformative Potential of LGBTQ+ Children's Picture Books**, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022, 270 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover), \$25.00 (paperback).

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Although it may be surprising to learn just how many LGBTQ+ children's picture books currently circulate, author Jennifer Miller thoughtfully introduces us to her archive of 200 of them. Written while Miller was an adjunct assistant professor, a precarious position that mirrors the production of many of these books, **The Transformative Potential of LGBTQ+ Children's Picture Books** offers up an impressive curation and genealogy of English language LGBTQ+ children's picture books. This book serves as an introduction to the variety of LGBTQ+ children's picture books available and distributed in the United States from 1972 to 2018. Miller's work is timely and important, as homophobic and transphobic rhetoric is on the rise, antitrans laws are being proposed across the United States, and there are concentrated efforts to ban books with LGBTQ+ content from schools and libraries. As such, this book is a hopeful reminder that the number and radical content of children's LGBTQ+ picture books have continued to grow and persevere, despite and potentially in response to societal backlash.



Miller persuasively argues that the stories found in these books do essential work by making LGBTQ+ existence legible and knowable (p. 4). Through her thoughtful and grounded analysis, Miller is convincing in her claim that LGBTQ+ children's picture books are significant as worldbuilding projects and as "essential pathways to queer visibility" (p. 207). As this book showcases, affirmative and explicit representation is politically important and holds transformative potential (pp. 3–4). Miller's aims in this book are threefold: (1) create a growing archive of LGBTQ+ children's picture books, (2) trace trends and tropes and explore how they have appeared and evolved, and (3) showcase the transformative potential of said books. Miller's main thesis is that these books have the potential to create imagined queer collectives that can lead to further feelings of belonging, community building, and a disruption of assumed norms, allowing both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ children to experience queerness, and even transformation. They help remake the world by showcasing the problems with our current system and offering those that read these books a window into what is possible.

After curating her 200 English-language book archives available in an appendix, Miller uses a genealogical approach influenced by cultural studies as a key theoretical framework to situate this project. She identifies dominant tropes and recurring themes, as well as modes of representation, and available

identities during certain time periods (p. 17). The concepts of critical optimism and queer love are explored throughout and frame the project (p. 25). As an interpretive lens, critical optimism allows Miller to see the transformative potential in seemingly homonormative books. As Miller argues, these books are “best read using critical optimism as an interpretive strategy to acknowledge when books are caught by a reality that constrains imagination and an imagination that desires radical change” (p. 37). Miller pushes back against the common charge that children’s picture books are homonormative by stating that just because something seems homonormative does not mean it is not powerful, as, at the very least, these books demand that certain identities be made visible.

Present in these chapters are illustrations of covers and pages from key examples of LGBTQ+ children’s picture books. After situating her project in chapter 1, chapter 2 explores books published or available in the United States before 2000. Importantly, Miller also explores how early books were most often created and published by small independent publishers, which impacted their appearance and reach. This chapter establishes dominant themes and tropes, such as the tomboy or pink boy, and how they emerge and develop in LGBTQ+ children’s picture books during these decades. Similarly, chapter 4 offers a deeper dive into the sissy boy, pink boy, and tomboy tropes. Chapter 3 focuses on how representations of gay and lesbian adults have changed across 20 years, such as the frequency and prevalence of gay and lesbian marriages as influenced by the changing status of gay marriage in the United States.

Chapter 5 examines the representation of transgender, nonbinary, gender-creative, and gender-free youth. Miller notes that a growing number of children are reinventing traditional gender identities “in favor of more flexible identifications” (p. 141). Importantly, this chapter explores how we need to reimagine and rebuild the world if we want queer children to thrive. Capuzza’s (2020) work on transgender representation in children’s picture books is a good accompaniment to this chapter, fleshing out in more detail how transgender content appears in children’s picture books. Chapter 6 explores how books represent children’s same-gender desire through “camp, fabulousness, or explicit desire” (p. 159). Miller notes that, at their best, these LGBTQ+ children’s picture books actively encourage readers to identify with queerness, even if they are not queer themselves (p. 164). Finally, chapter 7 considers how nonfiction LGBTQ+ books act as queer histories, offering LGBTQ+ historical events and people that are deemed as acceptable for children to read about. Ultimately, Miller’s hope is that the representations in these books will encourage people to critique assumed norms and heteronormative institutions toward transformation, not just inclusion.

This book has a lot to offer as an introduction to the shifting tropes and different types of LGBTQ+ representation in children’s picture books. Miller has built a thorough and impressive archive that is easily accessible in the appendices. The tropes that Miller finds between 1972 and 2018 are detailed throughout the book, and Miller explores ample examples of books in each time period and key examples of each of the tropes she lays out. Miller thoughtfully considers the sociocultural and historical factors that influence which tropes are visible and when, as well as how these tropes evolve. I find that Miller takes a careful and well-considered view of the transformative potential of these books while incorporating the potentials, pitfalls, and historical and social contexts surrounding their creation. Miller engages thoughtfully with a variety of academic sources, offers thorough examples, and takes care to reword and summarize for clarity.

A potential challenge of using critical optimism as a theoretical lens is that the actual potential for transformation via these books could be overstated. While I find Miller's claims well founded, I was left wondering about the increased harm that explicit LGBTQ+ representation can have. As Keegan (2022) warns, there tends to be an accompanying violence toward trans communities with increased media visibility (p. 26), which could certainly be the case more broadly here. These books can be transformative, but what about the challenges of increased visibility of LGBTQ+ children? With the increasing circulation of these books, has this helped increase the push for banning these books, along with other negative outcomes for the LGBTQ+ community? While I do not find this to be a weakness, I think it is an important consideration for future work. In addition to this concern, this archive only includes English-language books available and distributed in the United States, which Miller fully acknowledges. For a more international project, readers may find Epstein and Chapman's (2021) *International LGBTQ+ Literature For Children and Young Adults* of interest.

I find that this book represents a thought-provoking challenge to those who believe children's media objects are frivolous or that they do not hold transformative potential. Miller makes a convincing case for the connection between historical events, sociocultural contexts, and the stories available to us at any given time. Like other forms of LGBTQ+ representation, children's picture books struggle against, with, and for cultural and social change. This book is highly accessible to academic and general audiences interested in children's media; LGBTQ+ representation, gender, and history; and/or children's picture books. This book could be easily incorporated into an undergraduate classroom or used by researchers interested in LGBTQ representation or children's media, and by anyone curious about LGBTQ+ children's picture books.

In conclusion, this book serves as an excellent introduction to the range of content available in LGBTQ+ children's picture books, and traces a detailed genealogical account through an exploration of key themes and tropes present across five decades. The writing is clear, the book is well organized, and Miller offers the archive she has carefully built. The book is crafted for maximum understanding and clarity. It is a must-read for anyone interested in this material, and I suspect it will become a necessary addition to those interested in LGBTQ+ children's representation and in children's books. As such, I recommend this book and thank Miller for her important work on this topic.

References

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