



Understandings of Intersexuality in Current Novels

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Research Article

Abstract

The following paper examines different conceptualizations of intersexuality, as they appear in current day novels. The topic of intersex representation and conceptualization has, so far, been significantly under-researched. However, researchers such as Walker (2022), De Clercq (2022), and Pellegrini (2022) find that intersex representation may be a deciding factor in the way intersex people are perceived and treated. As such, it is important to further examine representations and conceptualizations of intersex people. This paper uses close reading as well as thematic text analysis to explore ten novels representing intersex people. It finds different repeated conceptualizations of intersexuality, reflecting different understandings of what being intersex means. These conceptualizations are: a punishment to hide, a medical issue, a personal secret, a superpower or advantage, something that does not matter, a revelation, a social issue, something subversive, and a reason to belong. They may reflect views about intersexuality in society, as well as contribute to their formation.

Keywords: Intersex, English Literature, Representation, Thematic Text Analysis.

Introduction

The following paper examined conceptualizations of what it means to be intersex, in various English language novels. It is based in the belief that intersex representation matters, following researchers such as Walker (2022), De Clercq (2022), and Pellegrini (2022). These scholars suggest that representation may be the deciding factor when it comes to the way intersex people are treated medically, legally and socially. Given this, it is important to explore what current representations are telling intersex people about themselves, and others about them. This paper examines ten novels that include prominent intersex representation. It seems to explore the different ways in which the novels perceive and conceptualize intersexuality, and the way they present it to readers.

Materials and Methods

The following paper examines current novels, to ascertain ways in which intersexuality is being conceptualized and understood. It utilizes both close reading and thematic text analysis to perform this analysis. Thematic text analysis (Guest et al. 2012) is a methodology in which texts are examined to find repeated themes. Those themes are then closely read and analysed.

The novels examined for this work are “Cattywampus” by Ash Van Otterloo (2020), “That Inevitable Victorian Thing” by E. K. Johnston (2017), “Across the Green Grass Fields” by Seanan McGuire (2021), “Just Ash” by Sol Santana (2021), “Sorrowland” (2021) by Rivers Solomon, “The Deep” by Solomon, Rivers, Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes (2019), “Pantomime” by Laura Lam (2015), “Middlesex” by Jeffrey Eugenides (2002), “Sovereign: Nemesis - Book Two” by April Daniels (2017), and “Icarus” by K. Ancrum (2024). “Cattywampus” (2020) tells the story of two teenage witches who struggle to come into their powers and sense of self. “That Inevitable Victorian Thing” (2017) is a regency inspired futuristic



novel about young people finding romance. “Across the Green Grass Fields” (2021) is about a teenager who is transported to a different universe. “Just Ash” (2021) is about a teenage boy who struggles with stigma and unwanted medical treatment of his intersexuality. “Sorrowland” (2021) tells the story of a teenager who runs away from a cult. “The Deep” (2019) is about a community of sea beings, born from slaves who were thrown off ships. “Pantomime” (2015) is the story of a teenager who runs away from an abusive home to join the circus. “Middlesex” is the story of an intersex person and his family. “Sovereign: Nemesis - Book Two” (2017) is about a trans superhero who is targeted by an intersex witch. “Icarus” (2024) is the story of an art thief and his intersex love interest, a recovering addict dancer. All have prominent intersex characters, in most cases, the protagonist.

It should be noted that this paper does not seek to provide an evaluation of how well these sources represent intersex people, or whether the information they provide is correct. As Pellegrini (2022) points out, books such as “Middlesex” are deeply problematic and harmful. However, after some consideration, I chose to include it in this work regardless, since it is widely known and is, unfortunately, many people’s only information about intersex people. As such, I find it important to examine more of what it portrays.

This paper offers an analysis of ways intersexuality is understood. The conceptualizations identified in this paper are not necessarily contradictory. Some texts display a variety of them. Different conceptualizations may exist at the same time in the same character, or in different times or characters. For example, “Just Ash” by Sol Santana (2021) includes a variety of intersex people, who have different conceptualizations of their intersexuality. This echoes findings that intersex people use different terms for intersexuality depending on who they are speaking with (Abrosimova et al. 2024).

Literature Review

Intersex is an umbrella term for people with medicalized or socially non-hegemonic conditions that frame them as other from entirely male or female (Wolff et al. 2022). Current research has found a variety of understandings of intersexuality. Commonly discussed is the medicalization of intersexuality. Many medical professionals hold the opinion that intersexuality has to be treated, in order to protect the intersexual person from stigma (Das 2022; Hegarty and Smith 2023; Mestre 2022; Roen and Oliver 2022). When criticized, some medical professionals assert that treatments have improved, rather than acknowledge that non-consensual treatments are unethical and harmful regardless of their supposed quality (Berry 2024). However, intersex activists strongly reject this conceptualization as dangerous and harmful (Bauer et al. 2020). Scholars such as Hegarty and Smith (2023) point out that medical intervention focusing on a stigmatized person is not a solution to a social problem, and cannot replace education. Bauer et al. (2020) explain that often treatment of intersex children is abuse and mutilation, and should be recognized as such. Monro et al. (2024) find that the erasure of intersex people from policy stands in the way of this recognition, and puts them in danger.

Hegarty and Smith (2023) found that the public does not necessarily agree with the medical conceptualization. They explain that this disproves the assumption made by the medical conceptualization, that stigma so prevalent and severe that it requires medical treatment. These issues are even more severe when combined with other types of marginalization. For example, for intersex asylum seekers and refugees (Monro et al. 2024). As Berry (2024) explains, older intersex people with disabilities also face unique troubles, that should be addressed, such as physical and mental health issues as a result of unwanted medical interventions in childhood.

The medical conceptualization is intrinsically colonial, not only in that it is based in settler cultures, but in that some medical procedures are based in experiments done on colonized



bodies (Rubin 2017; Malatino 2019; Wolff et al. 2022). Settler knowledge is still dominant and used to erase voices and knowledge such as Māori (Roen and Oliver 2022).

Previous research has found older conceptualizations of intersexuality and intersex people. Gilbert (2000) found that many historical representations fall under ‘monstrosity’ or ‘medical curiosity’. Later, Hart (2015) found that other framings were added or even replaced the previous ones. These new framings were ‘the innocent victim’, ‘the ultimate woman’, and, maintained, ‘the complete monster’.

Representation may be a deeply important aspect of intersex activism. Walker (2022) compares intersex rights and general LGBT+ rights. While some intersex people choose not to identify as LGBT+, others do (Berry 2024). Walker wonders why intersex rights are lagging behind, and suggests it may be a question of representation (2022). Walker reads medical reports as texts, to point out the importance of the way intersex people are represented in them.

De Clercq (2022), as well, finds representation to be important in changing harmful perspectives, yet cautions that some representations are more harmful than good. Pellegrini (2022) agrees, and suggests that texts may either replicate or subvert harmful ideas. If so, it is doubly important to examine emerging representations and the conceptualizations they provide. Hart (2015) suggests that since the turn of the century, representations have been shifting. Newer understandings of intersexuality appear alongside or even instead of monstrous or medical ones. This paper explores some of the current conceptualizations.

Discussion

The following section examines this research’s findings. The conceptualizations of intersexuality found in this work are: punishment, a medical issue, a personal secret, a superpower or advantage, something that does not matter, a revelation, a social issue, something subversive, and a reason to belong.

A common conceptualization of intersexuality is as something to either hide and fear being exposed, or disclose and be rejected. In Ash Van Otterloo’s “Cattywampus” (2020), the protagonist loses friends when it is revealed that she is intersex. In Jeffrey Eugenides’ “Middlesex” (2002), the protagonist avoids getting close to love interests, waiting for rejection and preferring to avoid it in advance. Here, the fear of being known is not unfounded, but rather than blame bigotry or systemic injustice, the protagonists feelbadly about themselves.

In E. K. Johnston’s “That Inevitable Victorian Thing” (2017), the protagonist almost ends two romantic relationships which she wants to continue, over her intersexuality. She feels as if it is a lie to withhold information about her gender and body from lovers. In Sol Santana’s “Just Ash” (2021), bullies at the protagonist’s school seem to feel similarly, and beat him up over not disclosing to his ex that he ‘is a girl’. Ash comes to the conclusion that it is his information to share or not share. He does not have to hide it, but he also does not owe anyone information about his body. In Seanan McGuire’s “Across the Green Grass fields”, as well, the narrator debates the protagonist’s choice to confide in a bad friend: “[S]taying quiet wasn't the same thing as lying. And that while her body wasn't any sort of shameful secret, she was under no obligation to share it with anyone. Especially not with a girl that had proven, over and over again, that she couldn't be trusted with anything that didn't fit her narrow view of the world” (McGuire 2021).

One conceptualization of intersexuality is as a punishment. In April Daniels’ “Sovereign: Nemesis - Book Two”, the antagonist doesn’t know she is intersex. She repeatedly shows transphobia towards the novel’s protagonist, ending up creating a magical trap for her, based on chromosomes. Since she is intersex, she ends up being captured by her own trap, thwarted by her own transphobia (and interphobia).

This plot point echoes problematic relationships between trans and intersex movements.



While, on the surface, it may seem as if trans and intersex goals should be in line with one another, trans scholars repeatedly ignore or erase intersex voices. As Wolff et al. (2022) point out, trans activists and scholars tend to disregard an uncomfortable shared history. Gender affirming medical procedures were originally developed on the bodies of BIPOC intersex people (Wolff et al. 2022). Such history should, at the very least, inspire trans people to uplift and support intersex people, rather than, as in this novel, treat intersexuality as a punishment.

Another novel that treats intersexuality as a punishment is Sol Santana's "Just Ash" (2021). While providing a variety of intersex representations, the novel also represents conceptualization of it as a dark secret. One of the novel's antagonists has known she was intersex from a young age, and has hidden that fact from her bigoted, abusive husband. She attempts to force her son, the protagonist, into unwanted surgery, and have the sister trying to help him imprisoned. The protagonist ends up blackmailing her to let them be. He threatens to reveal her intersex status to her husband, and put her in danger. While here, as well, the antagonist's internalized bigotry is her downfall, this plot is far from a happy ending for all. Both stories frame intersexuality as not only a dark secret to hide from the world, but as a downfall, a punishment.

Another conceptualization of intersexuality is as a medical issue to fix. This is an unfortunately enduring conceptualization, persisting for centuries (Gilbert 2000; Hart 2015). This conceptualization is at the core of the non-consensual medical procedures done on intersex people. At the same time, some intersex people find merits in it, as it allows for access to needed and wanted medical care (Abrosimova et al. 2024). This conceptualization, as this entire paper, echoes Oliver's (2013) and Kafer's (2013) work on disability. As Oliver explains, there are different models of conceptualizations of disability. One is the medical model, which perceives disability as a medical issue to be cured. This model centres medical professionals rather than the disabled person, and disregard's the social aspects of disability (as is discussed below).

This model is echoed in the behaviour of some of the antagonists in the novels. For example, in E. K. Johnston's "That Inevitable Victorian Thing" (2017), the protagonist's DNA is processed through a medical computer, that decides she is a man even though she seems to identify as a woman. In Sol Santana's "Just Ash" (2021), a doctor decides Ash's gender for him and convinces his parents agree to surgery he doesn't want. In Laura Lam's "Pantomime" (2015), the protagonist shares: "I had seen far too many doctors already, and none of them ever seemed to know quite what to make of me. They liked to exclaim, poke, prod, and then write articles in medical journals about me, calling me 'Patient X' or some other dramatic letter. I could not face it again" (Lam 2015). This experience is echoed throughout many of the narratives.

In Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland* (2021), the protagonist, Vern, refuses to be told the name for what she calls 'being in-between': "without a name for it it's just something I am, a part of life. Once it's got a name, I know that means someone has studied it, dissected it, pulled it apart. When something has a name, they can say it's bad", said Vern. And she didn't want to hear anybody else's thoughts on what was bad anymore. In fact, the more likely someone was to say something was bad, the more thought Vern would give to its potential goodness" (Solomon 2021). Vern, like many of the protagonists in the examined texts, yearns for her own subjectivity and voice when it comes to who and what she is.

Notably missing from medical representations, and representations of intersex people in general, is PTSD. While as discussed, many works of research point out that intersex people are subjected to trauma from medicalization and from stigma, and experience PTSD (Haghighat et al. 2023; Hartand Shakespeare-Finch 2022; Khanna 2021; Monro 2021; Van de Grift 2022), it is rare to find representations that reflect this. Hopefully, future representations include, for



example, people who experience triggers and flashbacks in regard to medical care.

Some of the texts frame intersexuality as an advantage, or even a superpower. For example, in Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass fields" (2021), the protagonist manages to squeeze through a small gap and escape her pursuers, thanks to the shape of her body: "for once her delayed puberty felt like a blessing and not a punishment. If she'd developed the hips or breasts she's been envying on the other girls [...] She might not have been able to fit" (McGuire 2021). In Ash Van Otterloo's "Cattywampus" (2020), the protagonist realizes she is the one who can save her town from fighting zombies pointlessly and dangerously, because "she'd had a whole life to spend pondering why folks feared different" (Van Otterloo 2020)

In other texts, being different is more than an advantage and even a superpower. In *Pantomime* by Laura Lam the protagonist finds out that some people like him have magical powers, as well as other advantages: "My sense of hearing was remarkably good, according to the doctors, along with my sense of smell, touch, and taste, and I rarely fell ill. They believed it was somehow linked with my birth disorder, though they had not come across it in other case.

This conceptualization is helpful in that it reframes bodies deemed bad by stigma as good. However, some of its more extreme iterations run the danger of making it seem as if an excuse for difference is required. As if only usefulness is good enough to excuse difference. Borrowing from Disability Studies, Kama (2004) interviewed disabled people about representations of disabled superheroes. It seems that while there was some enjoyment in seeing such representations, they also presented the possibility that disabled people would be required to be superheroes in order to be worthwhile. Similarly, it is important for this conceptualization not to require above and beyond from intersex people just to have the right to exist safely.

Another repeated conceptualization of intersexuality is of monstrosity or reclaimed monstrosity. Several of the characters frame themselves as monsters or freaks. This conceptualization echoes Malatino's (2019) reading of Michel Foucault and Herculine Barbin, framing difference as monstrosity and raising the possibility of reclaiming it. It is also in line with the framing found by Gilbert (2000) and Hart (2015).

For example, in Laura Lam's "Pantomime" (2015), the protagonist looks at a display of animals at the circus, thinking: "These were creatures on display only because they were malformed. Just as I would be put on display without a second's hesitation if I told the ringmaster what I was." (Lam 2015). The protagonist ends up joining the circus as an aerialist in training instead, perhaps subverting these founded fears.

This reclaiming is at times, as a subversive, innovative state thwarting traditional gender roles. In Rivers Solomon's "Sorrowland" (2021), the protagonist gives birth to a baby who may have, like her, "transgressed bodily notions of male and female" (Solomon 2021). The protagonist likes this possibility, thinking, "let him unfold as he would" (Solomon 2021). Moreover, the protagonist's body turns out it is living in collaboration with a form of fungi, that connects it to other bodies, leaving behind most human dichotomies.

This conceptualization echoes the 'superpower' one, in that it may place unfair demands on intersex people. There should be no obligation of intersex people, in particular, to subvert gender roles or fight the gender binary. Still, this subversive practice is worthwhile and helps society, when it is consensual.

A common conceptualization of intersexuality is a revelation, something to explain everything about life. For example, in Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass fields", the protagonist waits for her parents to tell her about herself: "She felt like she was being taunted with some great mystery that would put everything else into context. She was waiting for the world, which had been slipping slowly out of alignment over the course of the past year, to begin



making sense again" (McGuire 2021). Here, the protagonist's parents withhold from her a truth about herself. Intersexuality is understood as a great, deep truth that has the power to change lives to the core and explain anything. It frames intersexuality as so important to a person's life that its revelation has the power to change who a person is, or rewrite their entire world. While in Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass fields" (2021), the revelation does not shatter the protagonist's world, in Jeffrey Eugenides's "Middlesex" (2002), the protagonist learns of his diagnosis at 14, and promptly runs away from home to avoid medical procedures and to live as a boy. Another common conceptualization of intersexuality is, that it does not matter at all. As put by a character in "Just Ash" by Sol Santana, she loved the main character, Ash, not the shape of their privates (Santana 2021).

This conceptualization offers pros and cons to intersex representation. On one hand, it offers a form of neoliberal understanding. As long as one is nearly indistinguishable from the norm, one may be allowed similar rights to those of the norm. On the other hand, this approach does not account for the rights of those who are unable or unwilling to be nearly indistinguishable from hegemonic. It disregards the unique voices and lived experiences of intersex people, their knowledge and needs. It also disregards society's responsibility for systemic change, and accountability for past interphobia and endosexism.

Characters living in societies that are not interphobic, also seemed to experience no issue. The protagonist of "The Deep" by Rivers Solomon et al. (2019) lives in a community where everyone is intersex. The topic only comes up when she meets a lover from outside of the community. Similarly, the protagonist of Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass Fields" (2021) has some issues with society in the human world. She crosses into an alternative universe, populated by mostly non-human beings, in which intersexuality is not an issue. There, she gets to go through puberty in a safer, loving environment. As the narrator explains, "No one seemed to notice or care that puberty was passing her almost entirely by. And somehow, that took any potential sting out of the situation." (McGuire 2021)

A different conceptualization of intersexuality is as a social issue. Scholars such as Hegarty and Smith (2023) and Wolff et al. (2022) explain that intersexuality is a social matter at least in part: the issues around it are mostly or entirely a result of bigotry, and not of anything to do with the intersex person. This model echoes Oliver's (2013) work in Disability Studies. As Oliver explains it, an important model of conceptualization of disability is the social model. This model explains that many if not all issues a disabled person faces, are rooted in society's bigotry and not in any medical issue. Similarly, intersex people in the examined novels mostly face issues with interphobia and internalized interphobia.

In the novel "Cattywampus" by Ash Van Otterloo (2020), the intersex protagonist is Othered and prayed over by people who used to be her friends before they knew she was intersex. In Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass fields" (2021), the protagonist is criticized by her peers for not developing like them during puberty. She is framed as childish and immature, and suffers socially for it.

In "Just Ash" by Sol Santana (2021), the protagonist is revealed to be intersex, then faces a myriad of social issues. He is sexually assaulted by a friend who wants to touch his chest. He is suddenly framed as a girl, despite being a boy. He is kicked off the sports team he loves. His parents even try to force him into unwanted and nonconsensual surgery that he does not need. Terrified, he runs away from home, and police is sent after him to bring him back to the horror he had run from. The issues most intersex characters face are rooted in bigotry and stigma, in systemic structures that work against them.

Another important conceptualization of intersexuality is as part of a community. While



most representations seem to depict a single, Othered, intersex person, some view intersexuality as a way of belonging. In “Just Ash” by Sol Santana (2021), the protagonist’s sister makes sure to bring him to a peer group meeting. There, Ash meets a variety of intersex people, who later help Ash get by when Ash’s family sends the police after him. Meeting other intersex people broadens Ash’s understanding and gives him a place to belong.

This community is not always physical and tangible. In “Icarus” by K. Ancrum, Helios is an intersex recovering addict and dancer who is being abused by his father. He is, at first, unsure how his love interest would respond to his body. But his love interest, a painter, tells him –“there is a statue like you in Warsaw [...] you think I’d know art and not know this? [...] There have been men like you before we had words for it” (Ancrum 2024). While the community offered in this quote is not as tangible, it still allows for belonging. Helios has kin in history and in art, and like his kin, Helios can know he is not entirely alone.

Conclusion

This paper examines ten novels and analyses them to find various conceptualizations of intersexuality. The ways it finds that intersexuality is framed as a punishment, a medical issue, a secret, a superpower or advantage, a monstrosity, something that does not matter, a revelation, a social issue, and a reason to belong. While some of these conceptualizations of intersexuality are harmful, and others more subversive against interphobic systems, they all seem to exist alongside one another. As previous research suggests intersex rights are trailing behind general LGBT+ rights, perhaps as a result of a lack in good representation (Walker 2022). Additionally, perhaps the most prominent intersex conceptualization is complete erasure. Intersex representation may be the necessary tool with which to educate and reduce stigma, for example among policy makers and medical professionals (De Clercq 2022; Pellegrini 2022; Walker 2022). As such, examining the repeated tropes in intersex conceptualization is important, and has the potential of helping fight systemic interphobia.

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Author (s) Acknowledgement / Funding: Nil

Author (s) Contribution Statement: I / We have employed ethical writing methods to write this article.

Author (s) Declaration: I/We declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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OPEN ACCESS 

Article History

Received: August 31, 2025 **Accepted:** December 13, 2025 **Published:** December 31, 2025

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Data Availability Statement: The study utilizes primary and secondary sources of data and can be available from the author if requested.

Citation: Dean Leetal. "Understandings of Intersexuality in Current Novels." *Literary Musings*, Volume 3, Issue 2, December 2025, pp. 1-9.
