

**QUEERING CHRISTIANITY:
THE JOURNEY FROM RIGID DOCTRINE TO PERSONAL THEOLOGIES IN A
SELECTION OF YA LITERATURE WITH LGBTQ CONTENT**

by

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Abstract

Young Adult (YA) novels are quickly becoming an ever more influential and prominent part of the book publishing world. At their best, YA novels not only provide mirrors of self as well as windows to culture and opportunity for readers to see their world, themselves, their society or to see a different world in which they would rather live, but YA novels can also provide a mirror for young people to see a reflection of themselves, that is, to gain affirmation that they are not alone: they are represented (Bishop, 1990). With this view of YA fiction in mind, I have undertaken to analyze three novels—*Nothing Pink*, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight*—that each reflect the experiences of a group of teens underrepresented in fictional narratives: Gay Christians.

Utilizing a Queer Theology framework informed by the work of Goss (1999), Loughlin (2007), Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2009), and others, I seek to explore the nature of the interactions between the teenage protagonists in each novel and the Christian institutions—family, school, ministries, churches—that seek to hold them in a heteronormative grip. With each chapter of my thesis exploring a different aspect of this interaction, I follow a progression that begins with the protagonists rebelling against Christian dogma and assumptions, to queering and reclaiming that dogma, and ultimately, to finding acceptance and peace within the new theological framework. I go on to explore the place of these novels in the queer YA canon and examine the ways in which each book attempts to queer theology and expectations; I argue that is difficult, if not impossible, to fully escape dominant heteronormative assumptions when writing about Gay Christians for contemporary audiences.

I found that the authors of the three novels were successful at creating, through their protagonists, queered Christian dogma that counters Protestant Christian expectations, but from within the confines of a heteronormative frame. While not destroying all the work of queering Christian dogma that the authors undertake, their inability to work outside of a heterosexist framework does complicate the notion of queering the novels overall.

Preface

The idea for this thesis was originally developed in 2008 while I was working on a directed study project at Simon Fraser University, under the direction of Karyn Huenemann. The study was originally a survey of queer young adult literature from the 1980s to 2008, focusing on the impacts of religious institutions on the behaviour of young protagonists within the novels. Certain pieces of the directed study were either greatly expanded or removed to both focus this current project and create a much more focused examination of only three novels.

Portions of the 2008 directed study were published and are also included here, in the Introduction and Conclusions: Bittner, R. "Queering Theology: An Exploration of Theology in Queer Young Adult Literature." *Epistle* (2009): 29-33. Print.

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Without you I could never have made it this far.

You are my inspiration.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study comes out of my personal experiences of reading and time spent perusing young adult books in my teenage years. While much of young adult (YA) literature gives young people characters and situations with which they can either partially or wholly identify, as a young gay Christian youth growing up in North America in the 1990's, it was nearly impossible to find books with well written queer characters with whom I could identify.

Until David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), most queer YA novels were almost invisible; however, with the introduction of Teen Fiction sections in many bookstores, and with the publishing of a wide range of queer YA books each year, gay, lesbian, and transgender youth are now more and more able to find themselves in the pages of fiction. And as of 2004, young gay Christians are now able to see at least a small sample of their experiences within YA texts. It is because of the emergence of YA novels with queer content that the idea for this research project first surfaced. And it is with this in mind, that I offer an in-depth study of a small sample of novels that present young queer protagonists who work through challenges related to their Christian beliefs and spirituality.

1.1 Research Problem

While there has been an increase in YA novels with queer content since the early 2000s, it is likely that the queer youth of the early twenty-first century will continue to find it difficult to access a variety of fictional resources grappling with problems that have significance to their lives and, in particular, to issues related to their sexuality and religious and spiritual development.

Often teens are forced to choose between an acceptance of religion or of sexuality with one emerging at the expense of the other, unable to reconcile the two identities. However in the last few years a number of YA novels have been written that tackle the issue of queer youth struggling with their sexuality, Christian values, and spiritual development. It is the intention of this study to explore the ways in which a small sample of such novels presents issues of Christianity, spirituality and being queer.

1.2 Context and Significance

Literature for young adults is a literature of change; it conforms to the experiences of young adults in specific time periods and shifts with changing socio-political and religious ideologies. For young adults, this literature is an escape as well as a therapeutic tool, because it covers such a broad landscape of topics—from family and friendships to depression, suicide, and incest—while also showing how characters are able to cope with trauma and adversity, and find healing. As Kathy Cline points out in her article “Bonding in the Broken Places,” “[t]hrough problems and conflicts, literature allows young adults the catharsis for healing, rebuilding, and changing” (par. 1). Queer sexuality, religion, and spirituality, however, are under-represented topics within the rapidly growing body of YA literature; few authors, until the last decade or so, have taken on the task of burrowing into questions relating to spiritual, religious, and sexual identity and growth. While each topic individually has been strangely absent until very recently, even less evident are YA novels dealing with queer sexuality within the context of religion (in the case of this study, Protestant Christianity) and spirituality.

The body of works dedicated to queer content has been on the rise over the last two decades. However, up until the late twentieth century, the treatment of queer characters has been mostly negative (Cart and Jenkins). More recently, authors have finally begun to address the sexual identity of main and secondary characters in a sensitive and thought-provoking manner, providing role models for young people to aid in their own identity development, either sexually or spiritually, but these texts still remain very limited in number. So, where are all the novels that deal with queer adolescents, and the ways in which religious institutions and the constantly growing rifts between Gay Rights activists and the Religious Right in America affect their sexual and spiritual identities?

Queer YA literature generally contains either a primary character who is homosexual or who, in some way, deals with queer sexual identity and development, or a secondary queer character who is of great importance to the narrative arc. According to Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, as of 2004 the number of YA novels dealing with issues relating to homosexuality was around 150 titles (46). Of this small body of YA literature relating to queerness and the development of sexual identity, there is an even smaller number of titles that address the issues of queer sexuality *along with* religion and spirituality.

Teenagers want to be able to identify with the situations of the protagonists and with the experiences and challenges they face. As discussed earlier, I found very little in the way of texts to identify with in my adolescence, though in my college years another challenge was finding books I could identify with as a queer Christian. But the wait is over. Beginning with books such as Alex Sanchez's *The God Box* (2004) and Robin Reardon's *Thinking Straight* (2008), and Mark Hardy's *Nothing Pink* (2008), there are books for at least some young queer Protestant Christians to identify with. There are also books exploring queer

sexuality and Catholicism, Mormonism, and Judaism. Though the numbers are still small, the fact that there is an audience buying this literature shows that there is a need for such texts.

1.3 A Brief History of Queer Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature is still in the early stages of development and is therefore still in its own adolescent phase of finding an identity in the broader world of literature. Michael Cart's article "What a Wonderful World: Notes on the Evolution of Queer Literature for Young Adults" defines this literature as "the quintessential literature of the outsider," and yet, even within this outsider genre, the queer teenager "continues to be nearly invisible" (46). Cart identifies and critiques the inadequate body of queer YA literature and, for the most part, the negative portrayals of queer sexuality within the genre.

Generally, homosexuality in YA literature has been, and at times continues to be, presented as "a passing phase, and the affected characters are vastly relieved to realize, at book's end, that they are 'normal' and just like everyone else" (Cart, *Wonderful World* 48), or else the very idea of sexual identity triggers "convulsions of weeping, wailing, and noisy gnashing of teeth" (Cart, *Wonderful World* 50). This is particularly evident in what many consider to be the first queer YA novels *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, by John Donovan. In Donovan's book, a young boy from the suburbs in the late '60s moves into a small apartment in New York with his single mother, attends a new school, and becomes slightly more than friends with another boy in his class. While the boys' friendship ultimately falls apart, the appearance, however brief, of a homoerotic relationship between

two boys makes this book stand out especially because it was written in 1969 at the beginning of the queer YA genre.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, queer YA novels have presented stronger more positive queer characters able to survive in the world with his or her identity intact. Even among these novels, however, the genre still turns to “endless variations on questioning one’s sexual identity and the agonies of coming out” (50). Melinda Kanner observes, “homosexuality is too often simply a plot device or ‘problem’ to be overcome; only rarely does it occasion penetrating social criticism” (par. 5).

Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* (1982) has been praised for its depiction of a nameless homosexual youth who struggles with the guilt and shame of accepting himself for who he is. The real problem with this novel, however, is that the narrator never comes to any sort of personal reconciliation with his sexual identity. Instead, he is driven into a secretive, sex-obsessed lifestyle because he is so filled with guilt and shame about his sexual yearnings. White’s narrator is unable to come to terms with himself and his sexuality, and only crosses the barrier from young adulthood to adulthood through a sexual encounter with a teacher at his school. The question raised by *A Boy’s Own Story*, then, is: How beneficial is it for teens to read about a character who ultimately cannot come to a place of self-acceptance? Or is this a part of the process, viewing how the nameless narrator struggles toward, but never achieves, self-acceptance?

M. E. Kerr’s *Deliver Us From Evie* is a very significant story since, in the end, Evie is able to live her life freely as a lesbian. While this is a far cry from the ambiguous conclusions of *A Boy’s Own Story*, the novel still fails to break out of the general harshness associated with queer literature of the 80s and 90s. Evie still suffers because of her sexuality,

and the text focuses on the torments of other characters and their reactions to queer sexuality rather than concentrating on Evie's growth and development. Even though Evie eventually escapes the town and the hatred of her girlfriend's family, this escape only happens after she has endured torment and adversity relating to her sexual identity.

The subject of religion complicates Evie's experience. Her family belongs to a conservative Christian congregation and Parr, Evie's brother and the narrator of the story, dates a girl from a church in the next town. Conversations throughout the novel reveal a mistaken and naïve understanding of queer sexuality on the part of the religiously affiliated characters in the text. For example, during a discussion between Parr and his mother about Evie's sexuality, Parr states that he does not fit the stereotype of a farm boy: his mother responds, "[t]he difference is, you're not against the law, Parr. And the church doesn't call you a sinner" (67). Following this conversation with his mother, Parr talks with his friend Cord—again, about Evie being a lesbian. Cord's comments reflect the narrow views of many religious institutions:

"Do you think being a dyke is sinful?" I asked Cord.

"Hell no! It's not serious enough to be a sin. It's kid stuff. Two women... Now two men – that's another matter. That's sin in the Bible."

(101)

Because of these simplistic ways of thinking, the journey for Evie is even more difficult. She not only has to overcome issues within her family, but within the religious community she grew up in as well.

Dream Boy, by Jim Grimsley follows two boys from Christian families who fall in love, try to be together without being discovered by their dangerously conservative Southern

community, and ultimately run away together. Just as in *Deliver Us From Evie*, the two boys feel that they are only able to be together by running away from their families, their friends, their community. While they themselves overcome their own learned religious bias and end up falling in love with each other, the essence of the story is still the same: there are severe consequences to being gay. The most obvious example of this is the rape of the main character, Nathan, by another boy from school after he discovers Nathan and Roy in an intimate moment. The boy traps Nathan in an abandoned plantation house, rapes him, and beats him unconscious. This disturbing event is compounded when, during the rape, Nathan's mind flashes to past memories of being sexually abused by his father. The implication of the flashback is unclear, but it seems to imply that the sexual abuse is at the root of Nathan's homosexuality. And even if this is not the intent, it hearkens back to novels that underscore the general harshness associated with queer literature of the 80s and 90s, that is, the emotional and physical violence that befalls Nathan because of the sexual acts associated with physical intimacy between him and Roy.

Jack Gantos' *Desire Lines* is a good example of the trope of homosexuality as, not necessarily evil, but leading inevitably to negative consequences. Seen through the eyes of a sexually ambiguous narrator, the story is of two lesbians who, exposed to the overly fundamentalist son of a pastor, eventually attempt a murder-suicide. While *Desire Lines* not only provides homosexual teens with a negative scenario leading to tragic consequences, it also distorts religion, even if it does mirror some real-life "Christian" congregations (see the Westboro Baptist Church)¹. Gantos' treatment of religious fundamentalism results in

¹ The Westboro Baptist Church is an independent Baptist church known for their extreme and hateful messages against homosexuals, soldiers, and anyone they consider to be non-Christian. They are best known for their slogan "God Hates Fags," as well as for such

Christianity being portrayed as a destructive force that leads to ultimate tragedy for the lesbian couple. Gail Radley, in her article “Spiritual Quest in Young Adult Literature,” speaks to this type of novel. She explains that some novels show the protagonist finding answers within themselves, but in others, such as *Desire Lines*, “[o]rganized religion [...] is presented as quirky, repressive, even destructive” (par. 3).

Unlike the static and usually oppressive representations of religion in YA literature in the twentieth century, Queer YA literature dealing with religion in the twenty-first century most often includes novels of abandonment and/or reconciliation. In novels of abandonment the character dealing with sexual identity in the context of a religious upbringing finds the need to abandon either sexuality or religious beliefs in order to live a life of personal fulfillment. In novels of reconciliation, on the other hand, the characters are often able to find a way of balancing their sexuality and their belief systems, though not necessarily with adherence to the rigid teachings of a mainstream religious institution intact. More often than not, a personal spirituality is formed, in which pieces of theology from a religious background are kept and then molded into a workable belief system that allows for a more liberal understanding and acceptance of queer sexuality.

The following section provides a background important to an understanding of the issues explored in this paper: 1) the relationship and teachings of Christianity, homosexuality and scripture; and, 2) Queer/ing.

activities as picketing funerals of gay individuals, and for having a “clock” on their website that counts the days that hate-crime victim Matthew Shepard has apparently spent in hell. Their website is <http://www.godhatesfags.com/>.

1.4 Background to the Problem

1.4.1 Christianity, Homosexuality, and Scripture

Many denominations within Christianity hold a slightly different view of homosexual activity—not to be confused with a homosexual identity—ranging from acceptance to the excommunication of individuals found guilty of participating in homosexual acts. A commonality in the majority of Protestant Christian denominations is the welcoming of individuals attracted to the same sex while simultaneously teaching that homosexual relationships and sexual acts are sinful. The distinction is small but important; a person may be homosexual or have same-sex attractions, but acting out on these attractions is what is deemed wrong. Some American denominations that agree on this belief are the Methodist, Reformed, and Baptist churches, as well as the Evangelical Alliance, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and Southern Baptist churches. There are some denominations, though, that are accepting of individuals in same-sex relationships or who are open about their sexuality—both discussing and practicing it—and are not attempting to be saved² from it. These denominations include the United Church of Canada, the United Church of Christ, and the Metropolitan Community Church of America, which was founded specifically to minister to those LGBT people who felt unwelcome in other denominations (Jordan 116-20). And yet other denominations, such as Anglicans and Lutherans, are still embroiled in debates about the nature of homosexuality and the place of queer individuals in the church.

² “Saved,” within a Christian context, is a term referring to the saving of a person’s soul by accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, or by performing specific sacraments to cleanse the soul from sin. To be “saved” from homosexuality, then, is to be cleansed of same-sex desires to become a “normal” heterosexual, or to at least remain celibate so as not to sin through “unnatural” sexual acts.

Christian churches, at least those that are not considered welcoming, often refer to certain biblical passages as evidence of the sinfulness of homosexual acts. However, there is much debate and contestation surrounding each passage, much of the discussion regarding contextualizing the passages, explaining the epistemology of contested translations, and arguing for more liberal interpretations of scripture. Without branching off into an attempt at translation or epistemological study of Greek nouns, I will highlight what many gay-affirming groups and homosexual church attendees have termed “clobber passages.” These scriptural references are termed as such because they are used to condemn homosexuals and treat them as less than human in many cases. What is clear is that there is a distinct differentiation between homosexuality and homosexual acts, since one is an identity and the other is a bodily act. It should be noted, therefore, that these scriptures speak to acts of same-sex intimacy, not a homosexual identity.

The first and probably most contested passage is Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in the Old Testament (OT). The prominence of the story in Christian and conservative political discourse is evidenced in the fact that acts of anal intercourse were—and sometimes still are—referred to as sodomy. There are interpretations of this passage that consider the main theme to be either sexual violence or hospitality rather than homosexuality, but the verses that have become entangled in Christian dogma, are Genesis 19:4-5: “Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. They called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out so that we can have sex with them’” (NIV). In response to this demand, Lot offers to send his virgin daughters out to the crowd: interestingly, Lot’s response, to sacrifice his daughters’ virginity, is not considered to be problematic!

Another two “clobber” verses that are often quoted in anti-gay sermons or by ex-gay groups is Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The latter verse gains attention for its description of the punishment that must follow a homosexual act: “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.” This passage is very explicit that it is the *act* that is detestable, leaving some liberal scholars to conclude that gay sex was only detestable within the context of the time in which these laws were written and that such a law has no bearing in contemporary society. Many Christians agree that using Levitical law is not the strongest argument since other passages in Leviticus condemn those who wear cotton blend clothing and/or those who eat shrimp.

The New Testament also contains “clobber passages.” These passages are from the writings of Paul to the Romans and the Corinthians. However, in contrast to the Old Testament passages which are considered to be the ‘word of God,’ the writings of Paul are those of a man and, thus, may be considered fallible. The first of the New Testament “clobber” verses is Romans 1, specifically verses 26-27:

God gave them [the wicked and unrighteous] over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way that men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Much of the wording from this passage is reflected in Christian dogma, which deems heterosexual acts to be natural, while homosexual acts are described as unnatural and perverse. In much the same way as the passage in Romans declares homosexual acts

perverse, I Corinthians 6:9-10 lumps homosexual intimacy with sexually immoral acts: “Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders³ [...] will inherit the kingdom of God.” Here again it is the homosexual acts that are judged, not the sexual orientation of the person.

Other scripture exists that is also used as evidence within Christian teachings to oppress sexually active LGBTQ individuals, however they are not as often referred to in anti-gay debate. Because of these Biblical passages, anti-gay dogma has flourished and continues into current society, much to the detriment of LGBTQ people. These passages are also often quoted to justify sending queer teens to camps for heterosexual restoration or ex-gay therapies.⁴ The oppression of queer youth is due, in large measure, to these scriptures and it is within this context that I will be exploring the actions and rebellions of each of the three fictional protagonists in *Nothing Pink*, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight*.

1.4.2 Queer/ing

The term “queer” is a contentious one and may mean different things to different groups or individuals. With this in mind, I will give a brief history of the word and the particular definitions that are relevant to this paper. The Oxford English Dictionary places the first uses of “queer” in the early sixteenth century. It meant, and still often means, strange, unusual, or different. In the early twentieth century it was already gaining popularity

³ For more information about epistemology and interpretation of the Greek word, *arsenokoitai*, in this verse, see Justin R. Cannon’s *The Bible, Christianity, & Homosexuality* (2009).

⁴ Ex-Gay Ministries that are at work today in the United States and Canada include Exodus International, Desert Stream Ministries, Living Hope Ministries, and the Sexual Identities Institute, all of which can be found on the helpful resources section of the Exodus International website (<http://exodusinternational.org/resources/other-helpful-organizations/>)

as a descriptor of sexual deviance, particularly relating to homosexual or effeminate males. This definition was originally used in a derogatory sense, declaring homosexuality to be aberrant and deviating from the heterosexual norm. “Queer” began to be re-appropriated by those it was being used against after the 1969 Stonewall riots, but was not altogether successful until after 1990 when the group Queer Nation began a full-on campaign.

Michelle Abate and Kenneth Kidd, in the Introduction to their work *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children’s and Young Adult Literature*, discuss some of the difficulties of utilizing queer terminology. These difficulties will hopefully explain why it is necessary to understand in what ways I will be using the term within the realm of this research. Abate and Kidd write “[q]ueer’ defies definition, indeed is the antidote to definition in any easy or clear sense. The term at once fortifies and dismantles the notion of a stable or knowable self, in relation to gender and sexuality especially but not exclusively” (4). It is with this paradox in mind that I will attempt to narrow down, if only slightly, the ways in which the term will be used for the remainder of this study.

Currently, the term is used by academics to refer to studies and theories that look to change normative ideologies to become different or more inclusive of changing opinions. Queer theology is one of these areas. Theologians are beginning to “queer” theology by adapting it to be inclusive of new and emerging ideologies of sexuality and feminism. It is, as previously stated, still a contentious term, however, because while being popular among academics and younger generations, older generations still feel the hurt and disdain of the original derogatory meaning. I will be using queer as both an umbrella term for multiple sexual and gender identities and as a term to indicate a changing of normative ideologies surrounding sexuality and religious beliefs, as in the case of queer theology.

1.5 Chapter Overview

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the study's content, purpose and structure. Following the introductory chapter, chapter two involves a thorough literature review that covers influential texts on issues of queer sexuality, queer YA novels, and queer theology. The third chapter discusses the novel selection process and the evaluation criteria for that selection, as well as presenting an outline of queer theology and a critical framework for examining the chosen novels. Chapters four to six are primarily close readings and detailed comparisons of the three novels chosen for this study: *The God Box* (2007), *Nothing Pink* (2008), and *Thinking Straight* (2008).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Young Adults, Social Institutions, and Cultural Interactions

Influential monographs such as Rich Savin-Williams's *The New Gay Teenager* (2005) and in-depth texts on YA literature, such as Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins' *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* (2006), highlight the ways in which young people self-identify in the current socio-political environment. Savin-Williams highlights current trends in self-identification among queer teens while Cart and Jenkins document and analyze trends related to queer characters in young adult novels over the last four decades. Queer characters in YA literature exemplify the struggle of youth against social institutions. Roberta Trites perhaps says it best in *Disturbing the Universe*: "The chief characteristic that distinguishes adolescent literature from children's literature is the issue of how social power is deployed during the course of the narrative" (2). In queer YA literature, the social powers are often those of a political or religious institution that are deployed in such a way as to deny the character the ability to develop a sexual identity with which he or she can be comfortable. Often, "a major developmental crisis can occur when gay and lesbian adolescents attempt to establish an identity in a society that devalues their sexual orientation" (Vare and Norton 190).

The social environment surrounding young adults is therefore responsible for aiding in individual growth, whether positive or negative, by creating situations that require personal confrontation with institutional ideology; in other words, "the social power that constructs [young people] bestows upon them a power from which they generate their own sense of subjectivity" (Trites 7). By engaging in a dialectical relationship with institutional authority, the young adult is able to better locate his or her individuality than if simply left

with nothing to fight against. The twenty-first century young adult is in need of institutions and authorities to rebel against, “and indeed, adolescents do not achieve maturity [...] until they have reconciled themselves to the power entailed in social institutions with which they must interact to survive” (Trites 20).

Teenagers and sexual identity are treated much differently in the early twenty-first century than even in the mid- to late-twentieth century. In *The New Gay Teenager*, Savin-Williams discusses the fluidity of postmodern sexuality and the difficulties in keeping up with such constantly evolving discourse and rhetoric related to self-identities and politically correct references to sexuality and gender. He claims “[young adult] sexuality is not something that can be easily described, categorized, or understood apart from being part of [their] life in general” (1). He goes on to say, however, that “[t]he new gay teenager is in many respects the *non-gay* teenager [...]. They have same-sex desires and attractions but [...] they] have much less interest in naming these feelings or behaviors as gay” (1). The new gay teenager, then, is part of a movement regarding queer sexuality that desires to exist on an equal footing with heterosexuality, at least in the ways in which they are rhetorically described and identified.

Young adults in the twenty-first century are, in general, less concerned about sexuality as an abomination or a sin, but are still under societal and institutional oppression—decreased opportunities based on sexual orientation, or the inability to take part in church-related activities because of perceived sexual deviancy. John Cloud, in the *Time* article “The Battle Over Gay Teens,” addresses the issue of a rapidly growing and visible outing of youth

throughout America. In 2005, Cloud reports, Gay–Straight Alliances⁵ were being established at a rate of almost three per day. This indicates a positive and growing awareness of a need for stable environments within a constantly changing culture, including the myriad of opinions regarding how to reconcile sexuality to institutional ideologies.

Cloud discusses the divided subgroups within queer YA culture, namely those who accept that they are queer and those who wish to change—or believe they must change—their sexual orientation, or at least remain celibate in order to remain engaged in their respective institutionalized religious affiliations. This, as will be demonstrated later, has a complex and difficult impact on the evolution of queer YA literature with religious content. Conflicts surrounding queer sexuality and religious teachings are becoming ever more prevalent as the Queer community develops a more commanding presence within North American society. This growing presence, and increased instability in political and social discourse, serves to surround young adults with more confusing messages with each new conflict of opinion between liberal and conservative thinkers.

Some church-based associations in the United States are working to provide a practical framework for youth to reconcile homosexuality and religious teachings: Soulforce, Inc. is one of these groups. Soulforce has started a movement to help young gay Christians, and even youth of other religious backgrounds, to find peace in self-acceptance through careful consideration of religious doctrine—by which I mean the general teachings of a belief system, as opposed to the dogma, or the more fundamental tenets of a belief system—as well as personal spirituality. In a workbook entitled *Christian Youth: An Important Voice in the*

⁵ Gay–Straight Alliances (GSA’s) are clubs that form in schools, mostly in North America, to give queer teens and their straight allies a place of safety and community within the educational environment where they spend so much of their time during the school year.

Present Struggle for Gay Rights in America (2004), Soulforce addresses its audience with statements such as these: “As a Southern Baptist in the early twenty-first century, you have likely heard religious leaders speak negatively about homosexual people and those working for gay rights” (4); “You currently live in a society that oppresses you and a church that speaks falsely against you” (43); “Much [...] discrimination comes from the fact that some people believe that because their faith teaches against homosexuality, they can treat people of a different sexual orientation as second class citizens” (19). These excerpts reveal feelings of disquiet, even within the Christian community in the US, towards those denominations that claim the right to tell queer youth that they need to change or that they are not good enough, as they are, for God to love them.

Not surprisingly, these polarized views on sexuality in American society have led to an unstable environment for queer teens. They are told to have a secure sense of who they are and feel some semblance of self-acceptance in spite of continuing critical bombardment from more conservative Christian factions if they declare that they are, indeed, queer. Because of the impact these institutions have on American society, queer YA literature must change along with the cultural contexts in which it is written. This will perhaps give queer youth a solid referent, even if fictional, so that they have something stable to refer to—even within fictional texts—as they engage with the tumultuous debates on issues—Gay marriage, homophobia, masculinity and feminist studies, and the place of homosexuals in religious institutions—in the world in which they live.

Language in YA novels gives teens a view on how they are seen by others and by the social institutions surrounding them, in this case religious institutions. Trites puts it most clearly when she states:

Whether the institution under investigation is government, school, religion, identity politics, or another institution altogether matters less than the acknowledgement that institutions rely on language to regulate the individual's authority throughout the genre of the Young Adult novel. (53)

YA novels, by following social trends, also use the current language of youth in order to create relevant depictions of characters acting in the world. Religious institutions, by labeling queer sexuality as wrong, sinful, an abomination, give the impression that queer teens have less value within American society and, therefore, offer no aid to the queer young person looking to reconcile religious beliefs with sexual identity.

While much of the work discussed to this point deals either with the accuracy of representations of youth in literature or with the social interactions of young people and how those interactions are reflected in fictional texts, more recently scholars have begun to approach the reading of children's and young adult fiction through a queer lens. The recent publication of Michelle Abate and Kenneth Kidd's new anthology *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature*, for example, is a volume that highlights some of the most engaging and contemporary studies on queer texts for young people. Scholars in this text, theorize on topics from *The Wizard of Oz* to the biblical story of David and Jonathan. Abate and Kidd point out that much of the work in this volume has been "published in the wake of [...] progressive social politics as well as developments in literary-theoretical studies of the last several decades" (1).

This collection of essays and articles charts the progression of queer themes in children's and YA literature as well as the variety of ways in which queer theories and lenses are applied to the reading of such texts both in a contemporary and historical context. An

important perspective to gain from this work is the understanding that queer YA literature is something that will be always changing and therefore the lenses through which we read the texts must change as well. This applies both to queer theoretical approaches and queer theological approaches, the latter which—for the purposes of this thesis—will be examined thoroughly in the next section of the literature review.

2.2 Queer Theology

I will be organizing this section of the literature review chronologically in order to more systematically map the differences and progressions in queer theological ideology. I begin with Elizabeth Stuart's book *Religion is a Queer Thing: A Guide to Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People* (1998) and end with Patrick Cheng's recent *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (2011). Specifically, this review will discuss and explore the ways in which queer theology relates to heteronormative assumptions as well as how it differs from mainstream heteropatriarchal theologies.

In her Introduction to *Religion is a Queer Thing*, Stuart explains:

[o]ne of the most extraordinary features of late twentieth-century Christianity has been the way in which innumerable groups of Christians who have been the object of theological discourse and discussion have found their own theological voice as part of wider social movements in which they have claimed the ability and right to define and reflect upon their own experience.

What is now often labeled, as 'queer theology' is part of this process. (2)

Stuart goes on to describe that “[q]ueer theory takes what is known as a social constructionist view of sexuality.... Its interpretation, or construction, is almost always bound up with issues of power of those who categorize and label and of those who are labelled (3).

Before the inception of late-twentieth-century gay/lesbian and queer theologies, queer individuals were unable to be part of theological discourse and were—and in many cases still are—at the mercy of Christian doctrine which preaches a God that does not accept queer sexualities as legitimate or culturally acceptable. By engaging in critical discussions on theology, queer individuals are transgressing the boundaries of heteronormative theologies.

The transgressive nature of queer theologies is the topic of Robert E. Goss’s work. In *Queer Theologies as Transgressive Metaphors: New Paradigms for Hybrid Sexual Theologies* (1999) Goss discusses the difficulties associated with earlier gay/lesbian theology, that is, many gay and lesbian theologians have “fallen into a trap that makes hetero/homo gender preference exclusive meta-categories of sexual identity” (44). Goss argues that such an approach, ignores bisexuals and transsexual or transgender individuals who are not included in current gay/lesbian theological discourse, “[n]either bisexual men, female to male transsexuals nor intersexed males fit into [a] gay template,” (44-5) nor do bisexual women, male to female transsexuals, or intersexed females, for that matter. Goss argues for a more fluid approach to queer theology that is capable of including multiple sexualities not on the hetero/homo spectrum.

Goss’s work critiques theologians who forget that the queering of theology also involves the queering of gay normativities. Speaking as a queer Christian, Goss explains that “[h]eteronormative theology excludes [him] except in its hermeneutics of abomination while gay normative theology excludes [him] in its apologetic attempts to assimilate into

mainstream culture” (46). This explanation gives insight into the unique difficulties associated with the act of queering; the act of queering is to make something more inclusive and therefore more accessible to the mainstream, but once it has become mainstream, it is technically no longer queer.

Transgressing boundaries and power structures is a central theme of Goss’s work; this is also a theme in the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood. In *Thinking Theology and Queer Theory* (2007) Althaus-Reid and Isherwood lay out two central themes: 1) queer theology as an ideology on the margins and 2) the use of queer theology to challenge and push boundaries. In this article, the authors state, “Queer Theology takes its place not at the centre of the theological discourses conversing with power, but at the margins. It is a theology from the margins which wants to stay at the margins ... Queer Theology strives [...] for differentiation and plurality” (304). The point of queer theology is to create a frame that is fluid and which allows for an ideology that can work from outside of a dominant heteronormative social space. In order to do this, queer theologians work to create a theology that “challenges the boundaries and wishes to propel us into a much wider paradise, one no longer walled and narrow like that in Genesis” (310).

Althaus-Reid and Isherwood explore some of the criticisms of queer theology. They note the concerns of feminist thinkers—many of whom fear the fate of women in queer theories and ideologies, many of which are male-dominated—and also the concerns of liberation theologians who are worried that “queer politics has no interest in analysing capitalism viewing the main issue as one of access and not the system itself” (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 313).

Finally, the authors argue that queer theology is about more than just destabilizing a heteronormative theology; it is about creating a more open and wide-ranging space for critical interaction with theology.

In *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (2007) Gerard Loughlin speaks to a number of ideas about queer/ing and theology. The majority of the introduction to this text explores the term “queer” and interprets its meaning. While the term *queer* as it applies to this study was discussed in chapter 1, it is important to understand Loughlin’s perspective on the term. According to Loughlin, queer “finds itself curiously central to culture at large, disavowed but necessary for a heterosexual normalcy that defines itself in terms of what it rejects” (8). He goes on to argue, “[q]ueer seeks to outwit identity. It serves those who find themselves and others to be other than the characters prescribed by an identity. It marks not by defining, but by taking up a distance from what is perceived as normative” (9). As many of the other queer theologians discussed here note, the queering of theology requires a move both toward and away from definitions. It is necessary to expand definitions of theology, and in doing so, begin to define queer theologies as those that distance themselves from a perceived heteronormative bias.

Loughlin also discusses the peculiarity of using a term that has negative connotations, to define a new ideology that strives to be more inclusive:

[I]t is perhaps perverse to describe theology as queer, for theology serves the very churches where such insults are thrown, where those who love their own sex were once named as ‘sodomites’ [...] and are now described as ‘objectively disordered (to be reordered)’. The churches are places where queers are harassed. But language, like life, is never tidy. (8)

The language that was once an insult is now the language of inclusion. The theology that once alienated queer individuals is now being queered to include *all* individuals regardless of gender and sexuality. Essentially, “[q]ueer is the insult *turned*” (8). But queer theology goes beyond the terminology and must also be considered in terms of its history and its roots in liberationist theology and gay/lesbian theology.

For a brief, but critical discussion of the history of queer theology, I look to *Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Theologies: Origins, Contributions, and Challenges* by Mary Elise Lowe. According to Lowe, new approaches to theology, including theologies of liberation, have emerged over the last 30 years, including lesbian/gay theology and queer theology. At first glance, there appears to be little difference between lesbian/gay and queer approaches to theology, however, as Lowe argues, “gay/lesbian theology assume[s] that human identity is stable and autonomous. In contrast, queer theologians aver that identity is fluid, and subjects *come to be* in language and discourse” (58). The biggest difference between gay/lesbian theology and queer theology, states Lowe, is that “those theologies described as lesbian/gay trace their histories to theologies of liberation, while queer theology is indebted to post-modern and queer theories” (49).

Finally, I turn to the work *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* by Patrick Cheng. Cheng describes queer theology: “Simply put, if theology is defined as ‘talk about God’ (that is, *theos* [God] + *logos* [word]), then queer theology can be understood as *queer talk about God*” (2). Of course, as Cheng goes on to say, it is necessary to understand what is actually meant by the term *queer* in order to fully understand what is involved in applying a queer theology as a suitable framework, whether for life or for a textual analysis.

As many of the other theologians and scholars discuss, there are numerous possible meanings associated with queer terminology. Cheng notes three important meanings: queer as an umbrella term to cover multiple non-heterosexual gender and sexual identities; as a transgressive action; and, as erasing boundaries (6). In light of these three definitions, Cheng offers three possibilities for the meaning of queer theology in each case:

First, queer theology is LGBT people “talking about God.” Second, queer theology is “talking about God” in a selfconsciously [sic] transgressive manner, especially in terms of challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender. Third, queer theology is “talk about God” that challenges and deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity. (9)

The important and relevant theme to take away from all three of these possibilities is that of talking about God. All three of these definitions include some form of queerness that moves against heteronormative Christian assumptions and it is this act of breaking away from the normative that will be at the centre of my study of the novels by Reardon, Sanchez, and Hardy.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Novel Selection Process and Evaluation Criteria

In preparation for this research project, I started by reading any books that I could find with LGBT themes from 1990 – 2011 that also had some form of religious content. These books were found through library search engines, Amazon.com, several blogs—*Queer YA: Fiction for LGTBQ Teens* (<http://daisyporter.org/queerya/>), *Out in Print: Queer Book Reviews* (<http://blog.outinprint.net/>), and *I'm Queer. I'm Here. What the Hell do I Read?* (<http://www.leewind.org/>)—and *The Heart Has Its Reasons* by Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, which contains an annotated bibliography of many books with gay or lesbian content from 1969-2006.

After reading a large number of books discovered from the above sources, I narrowed my choices down to novels that had a primary or secondary character identified as LGBT and also had some religious affiliation or grew up in a religious family. At this point I was left with ten novels that I was particularly interested in studying (see table 1.1)

Table 1.1 Initial Selection of Novels

Title	Author	Publisher	Year
<i>Boy Meets Boy</i>	David Levithan	Knopf	2003
<i>Evil?</i>	Timothy Carter	Flux	2010
<i>The God Box</i>	Alex Sanchez	Simon & Schuster	2008
<i>Gravity</i>	Leanne Lieberman	Orca	2008
<i>Latter Days</i>	C. Jay Cox & T. Fabris	Alyson	2004
<i>Nothing Pink</i>	Mark Hardy	Front Street	2008
<i>Oranges are not the only Fruit</i>	Jeanette Winterson	Bloomsbury	1985
<i>Seventy Times Seven</i>	Salvatore Sapienza	Haworth Press	2006
<i>The Shell House</i>	Linda Newbery	Laurel Leaf	2002
<i>Thinking Straight</i>	Robin Reardon	Kensington	2008

After reading and noting the religious groups focused on in each of these texts, I narrowed the selection to those that dealt with Protestant Christianity and those that focused

on a male protagonist in order to keep gender issues from complicating the discourse of my research (see Table 1.2). Since young men and women interact differently with power structures in many cases, engaging in an analysis of texts with both male and female protagonists, gender difference could overshadow other themes being examined.

After deciding to analyze only novels with male protagonists, I narrowed my search to the most relevant and recent titles, keeping only those published within the last five years. This left me with *The God Box* (2007), *Nothing Pink* (2008), and *Thinking Straight* (2008). These three novels were selected, in the end, because of their timeliness, positive and sensitive handling of LGBT and religious issues, and for their writing style. These three texts all have similar structures as well, in terms of the journey the protagonists take in order to re-evaluate and reclaim theologies in a more personal and applicable way.

Table 1.2 Protagonist's Gender and Religious Affiliation by Novel

Title	Protagonist's Gender	Religion
<i>Boy Meets Boy</i>	Male	Protestant Christianity
<i>Evil?</i>	Male	Protestant Christianity
<i>The God Box</i>	Male	Protestant Christianity
<i>Gravity</i>	Female	Judaism
<i>Latter Days</i>	Male	Mormonism
<i>Nothing Pink</i>	Male	Protestant Christianity
<i>Oranges are not the only Fruit</i>	Female	Protestant Christianity
<i>Seventy Times Seven</i>	Male	Catholicism
<i>The Shell House</i>	Male	Protestant Christianity/Catholicism
<i>Thinking Straight</i>	Male	Protestant Christianity

The God Box is about a gay protagonist, Paul, who comes from a conservative Christian family living in a small town in the southern United States. A new student, Manuel, arrives at Paul's school. Manuel is attractive, funny, and friendly, and also seems to have no problem reconciling his sexual identity with his Christian beliefs. Through his interactions with Manuel, the protagonist is prompted to reconsider his own understanding of

himself, his sexuality, his friends, and his religious identity. Alex Sanchez is a popular author who has written a number of novels on the experiences of young gay teens, among them *Rainbow Boys* (2001), *So Hard to Say* (2004), and *Getting It* (2006).

Mark Hardy's *Nothing Pink* is about a young boy in the 80s, living in small town America. Vincent is the son of a pastor, he is gay and, as the story unfolds, he is attracted to another boy, Robert, who attends the same Protestant Christian church. As his attraction for Robert grows, Vincent must examine his religious upbringing and the Christian doctrine his parents teach against his own identity and against his feelings for Robert. Though not as well established as Sanchez, Hardy is a strong writer, creating likeable characters for readers to care about and identify with. This book is particularly sensitive to the experiences of gay teens who lived only a few decades ago.

Thinking Straight, by Robin Reardon, is perhaps the most current of the three novels novel in tone, and also the most relevant in terms of the text speaking to popular culture and current events in America. The protagonist, Taylor, has found love with a young man, but his conservative Christian parents are deeply opposed to the relationship. Fearing for their son's future—an eternity in hell, as they see it—they send Taylor to a camp for reparative therapy. While there, Taylor meets a group of Christian teens who are not afraid to examine their sexuality alongside the religious doctrine they have grown up with. Taylor is able to better understand his own conflicted feelings and has a chance to let others—his parents, the leaders at Straight to God, and others he meets in the future—know that he is not in need of fixing. Reardon has written other novels about gay teens, including *A Secret Edge* (2007), *A Question of Manhood* (2010), and *The Evolution of Ethan Poe* (2011).

Once the sample of novels had been finalized, the criteria listed in section 2.2 was used to build an overview of each text and the ways in which they are similar to and different from each other. With this initial stage complete, the texts were subjected to a thorough, rigorous close reading using the research questions outlined in chapter one.

3.2 Criteria for Initial Novel Evaluation

1. Acceptance or rejection of sexual identity in favour of Christian affiliation;
2. Acceptance or rejection of Christian affiliation in favour of sexual identity;
3. Positive or negative treatment of sexuality by other characters in the text;
4. Prominence of queer sexuality and identity formation within the story arc.

3.3 Theoretical Framework: Queer Theory and Theology

While the theoretical framework for this study is informed by queer theology, specifically, the works of Cheng (2011) and Loughlin (2007) it is important to note that the theoretical frame is influenced by the work of Judith Butler on gender performativity and Eve Sedgwick's work that explores and uses the metaphor of *closet* to articulate the notion of silence or silencing of someone regarding his or her sexuality.

Queer Theology seeks to deconstruct historical and heteropatriarchal assumptions in previously hetero-exclusive theologies. By breaking down assumptions and expanding current notions of what theology is—or should be—queer theology is able to find ways of understanding identity in relation to God that are not limited to heteronormative conjecture. Queer theologians, such as Goss (1999), Loughlin (2007), and Cheng (2011) dismantle sexual ideologies that have been assimilated into much of mainstream theology over time,

and in doing so are opening up the realm of theological discussion to not only include queer individuals, but to also include queer readings of scripture and the queering of heterosexual expectations in mainstream Christian culture.

While engaging with and queering theology, it is necessary to look to the work of Judith Butler as it relates to the social construction of gender and sexual identities. That is, queer theology challenges heteronormative theological assumptions by deconstructing heteronormative definitions within theology. These heteronormative assumptions are based on socially constructed norms of sexuality and gender, the deconstruction of which is at the heart of the work of Judith Butler. “Queer theologians have rejected the essentialist argument and many employ Butler’s theory that sex is not natural (without interpretation) and gender is performed” (Lowe 58). In light of this interpretation of queer theologies, I will examine cultural assumptions at work within each of the texts in this study, reading perceptions of gender and sexual identity based on actions, behaviours, and performance, and in relation to Christian presumptions.

Cheng (2011) states queer theology is *transgressive* in that it rebels against mainstream doctrine taught in many Christian denominations, and in doing so, it attempts to break down boundaries between anti-gay dogma and those queer individuals who wish to practice Christianity without feeling discriminated against by their peers. The three novels in my thesis will be closely read to note particular ways in which mainstream theology is queered as the protagonists interact with scripture and doctrine, and those who try to oppress them using anti-gay rhetoric in the guise of Christian concern for the protagonists’ spiritual well-being.

The role of parents within these queer YA narratives will be examined. Often young people see adults, and especially parents, as oppressive and detrimental to their freedom to grow-up feeling comfortable in their own skin. This feeling can be intensified within the confines of a religiously minded family unit if a child decides to come out as queer: The feelings of oppression, however, may not be limited to the queer young adult, oppression may also be felt by the parents. Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* writes that

[w]hen gay people in a homophobic society come out...to parents...it is with the consciousness of a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in both directions. The pathogenic secret itself, even, can circulate contagiously *as a secret*: a mother says that her...child's coming out of the closet with her has plunged her, in turn, into the closet in her conservative community. (53)

Thus, Christian parents may feel that their queer children are a blemish on them and their status in the Christian community.

Finally, I examine the novels for signs of queering the genre of YA literature. For this study I am, in some ways, attempting to put the three novels being discussed into a fixed space for analysis. But while I wish to hold these three novels *still* so that I can analyze them I am also, simultaneously, hoping to identify the ways in which these novels might be pushing the boundaries of heteronormative narratives still prevalent in queer YA literature

3.4 Research Questions

The following three questions will be the basis for the three results chapters in this thesis. Each question corresponds with a chapter and will be answered using a combination of queer theoretical/theological approaches and close readings.

- 1) How do the relationship dynamics between queer young adult protagonists and the religious ideology of family members, close friends and (soon-to-be) significant others affect the processes of coming out and navigating evangelical Christian dogma?
- 2) How do these texts reflect current values and public discourse presented in American society and Christian culture? In what ways do the protagonists in selected novels rebel against American Protestant Christian perceptions and expectations related to queerness and relationships?
- 3) Have the authors of the three primary texts under study managed to queer their position within the YA genre in any way? Or do they still follow heteronormative and Christian assumptions throughout the novels? What implications does the queering or failure to queer each book have on the issues they are exploring?

3.5 Chapter Overview

Each of the remaining chapters tackles one of the three research questions. Chapter four: Families, Closets and Dogma, will focus on the first question for the study: *How do the relationship dynamics between queer young adult protagonists and the religious ideology of family members, close friends and (soon-to-be) significant others affect the processes of coming out and navigating evangelical Christian dogma?* Chapter five: Reflecting On and Rebelling Against Christian Dogma, will focus on question two: *How do these texts reflect current values and public discourse presented in American society and Christian culture? In what ways do the protagonists in selected novels rebel against American Protestant Christian perceptions and expectations related to queerness and relationships?* Chapter six:

Erasing Boundaries? (Or Not?), will focus on the final question for this study: *Have the authors of the three primary texts under study managed to queer their position within the YA genre in any way? Or do they still follow heteronormative and Christian assumptions throughout the novels? What implications does the queering or failure to queer each book have on the issues they are exploring?*

Chapter seven, the conclusion and further discussion, includes observations from the close-reading chapters, compares and contrasts the treatment of Christianity and the protagonists as explored in chapters three to five, and explores opportunities for further research related to this study.

Chapter 4: Families, Closets, and Dogma

How do the relationship dynamics between queer young adult protagonists and the religious ideology of family members, close friends and (soon-to-be) significant others affect the processes of coming out and navigating evangelical Christian dogma?

Using a lens of queer theology informed by the work of Eve Sedgwick (1993) this chapter explores two interconnected issues related to the understanding and queering of Christian dogma: close personal relationships—with family members, close friends, and (soon-to-be) significant others—and religious ideology. Many young people who grow up in conservative Christian homes and church environments are subjected to very specific interpretations of scripture and Christian ideology from parents and close friends, in addition to what they learn from sermons. The relationship dynamic between young people and their parents must go through a significant change—both in how they interact and how they identify each other—after the *coming out* process, and it often leaves both sides open to hurt and emotional trauma if there is no allowance for such change from either side. Young people may feel they are betraying their parents, and parents may feel betrayed and ashamed because they believe they have done something wrong in the upbringing of their child. Or the parents feel that they must hide the fact of their child's sexuality from the rest of their Christian friends because of mainstream traditions of heteronormativity within a Christian context. As Sedgwick proposes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, gay people in homophobic contexts—in this case gay-opposed Christian society—have the potential for serious emotional and psychological injury. She also asserts that a child coming out to conservative

Christian parents can plunge the parents “into the closet in [their own] conservative community” (53). However, the process of coming out (while potentially being painful and hurtful) also has potential for growth and change within parent-child relationships.

Throughout the rest of this chapter I will look to each text for examples of dynamics between protagonists and close relations and the ways in which each protagonist learns to take up Christianity and queer it to allow for greater flexibility as relates to emerging sexual identity transformations within religious contexts. Each of these texts takes a slightly different approach to the process. *Nothing Pink* is an examination of being gay in the 70s and of having a father who is also a pastor, further complicating the already fragile father-son relationship. The dynamics here at play are much different than in *The God Box*, where the father is not religiously inclined and there is no mother in the picture, which may explain the addition of Paul’s grandma in the narrative as a supportive motherly figure. Paul is also close to his Bible study group friends in the initial chapters of the novel, mirroring the relationship dynamic of siblings or close relatives. The last of the texts, *Thinking Straight*, takes an entirely different approach with a protagonist who, at the beginning of the novel, already has a queered theology and instead of trying to come to terms with his identity, is instead trying to work toward helping others, such as his parents, come to a more tolerant and understanding place within a Christian context.

4.1 *Nothing Pink* (Mark Hardy)

Nothing Pink specifically addresses the competing forces of sexuality and religious teachings in the life of Vincent Harris, teenage son of a Protestant pastor. On the first Sunday at his father’s new church, Vincent meets another teen, Robert Ingle, with whom he

eventually falls in love. While the story is relatively simple in terms of the relationship plot, the novel's strength lies in its exploration of sexuality and religion. The text includes very few instances of quoted scripture to prove any points, but mostly reveals how Vincent comes to terms with himself through deep reflections on his life experiences both inside and outside of the church. The experiential component is more explicit in this novel than in any other novels considered for this project. While Sanchez and Reardon use dialogue as a way of exploring sexual and religious issues, Hardy follows the conscious thought processes of his protagonist to explore Vincent's examination of the Christian beliefs his parents hold for him—mostly that they want him to end up in a Christian, heterosexual marriage—and the ways in which he comes to an understanding of his identity as a young gay Christian.

The experiential element of this novel, I believe, is what makes it a very strong representation of the path that YA literature is beginning to take toward sensitive treatments of religion in novels with queer content. Instead of requiring Vincent to choose between the world of materialism and sexual promiscuity and the Christian world of heteronormative behaviour, Hardy keeps the conflict mostly within his protagonist's own psyche. The reconciliation process, then, becomes less about choosing a side, and more about using experience and logical reasoning to find a suitable, internal spiritual belief by which Vincent can live comfortably with his identity. Vincent has a number of moments in which he attempts to work out real experiences in the light of the religious doctrine that he has been taught by his parents and the church:

[F]or years I've been waiting for God to send me a sign that He's saved me, forever and ever amen. And I always thought His sign would be to change me, to take away every impure thought, wipe out every homosexual desire,

make my limp wrists stiff, stop my hips from swishing when I walk. He made the lame to walk and the blind to see, raised Lazarus from the dead; surely He could save me. But now I'm thinking that maybe I had it all wrong, and maybe, just maybe I don't need to be changed. (79)

Vincent's parents become the voice of religion. For example, after his mother finds a gay-themed magazine under his mattress,

[Momma] doesn't even need to read the pages [of the magazine], doesn't even have to open the cover to see how terrible they are. She now has absolute proof that her son is gay. And not a repenting, nonpracticing, born-again homosexual—a Sodom-and-Gomorra, hell-bound, pornography-reading pervert. (84)

In this instance, his mother's deeply disappointed and negative reaction, along with the deep-seated theology that Vincent has been taught, surface and become the powers against which he must struggle to gain his sexual and spiritual identity. In his mind, he begins to second-guess his previous hope that maybe God doesn't want him to change. He doubts his own ability to reason outside of the Christian doctrine so intrinsic to his Christian upbringing: "What if I really am possessed by demons? What if Satan disguised his voice so he sounds like God and is deceiving me to think I'm okay?" (85). Hardy is successful, here, in showing the incredible power that Christian teachings have on the minds of young people navigating adolescence: "The Bible warns that [Satan] comes as a wolf in sheep's clothing. Even the righteous will be deceived. Who am I to think God speaks the truth to me? Maybe I am the pervert they [Vincent's family and church friends] fear. How does anyone know which voice to believe?" (85). Vincent does not claim that the church is evil, however, so rather than

descending into a diatribe against Christianity, the novel provides a space for an exploration of ideas regarding homosexuality and Christian doctrine.

Much of what Vincent has to struggle against here is not scripture, or even specifically homophobic sermons, but simply his parents and their interpretation of his sexuality and the way he “should” be: these expectations are, of course, further complicated by Vincent’s father also being the pastor of the church. Vincent’s father’s desire for Vincent to be “normal,” is not only for the sake of the family, but also for his reputation as the leader of a church congregation.

Much of Vincent’s resistance to change comes from his drive to oppose his parents. After they attempt to pray out the gay, Vincent says, “God’s loving arms are wrapped tight around my shoulders. He has built an invisible shield between me and the prayers of my parents” (86). Vincent’s understanding that God does not want to change him to a “normal” heterosexual boy comes from the fact that his parents, the pillars of his Christian home life, cannot convince God to bring about a difference in his feelings.

Later, Vincent thinks to himself, “I can already tell their prayers didn’t work. Nothing has changed inside me. That doesn’t bother me anymore” (89). The fact that it bothered him before but not now reveals that the parental influence, retrospectively, was a major contributing factor to Vincent’s understanding of Christianity. At the end of a weekend of church camp, when all the youth are asked to write their sins on pieces of paper to nail to a cross as a symbol of giving up their sinful nature to Christ, Vincent comes to a conclusion:

Before Momma and Daddy laid hands on me, I wouldn’t have had to think twice about it. I would have written *Homosexuality* on my paper and been

one of the first to finish. But tonight, I have to rack my brain. If I'm not

begging God to deliver me from being gay anymore, what else is there? (105)

It is at this point—when he understands that his parents don't know everything and that God is different than his parents have always tried to teach him—that Vincent finally begins to question and reclaim/recreate his personal theology: “‘Pray your heart out,’ I say [to my mother], not even under my breath. I can't believe the words that just jumped out of my own mouth, but I keep going. ‘The Bible says, “Ask and it shall be given,” Momma. “Seek and ye shall find.” But God's got to be bigger than the Bible. Because you and me, we're asking for opposites’” (99-100). God has become someone different to Vincent now: a presence that is bigger than outdated laws about homosexual acts written in a book thousands of years ago.

Homosexuality, for Vincent, was at first something to be feared, destroyed, or at least repressed. But as *Nothing Pink* progresses, Vincent and Robert come to a place—emotionally and theologically—where they can be themselves, at least with each other. Being together is where Vincent gains much of his strength. Knowing that God is there is one thing, but having a physical human being with whom to share life is an entirely different experience:

Barry [Manilow] sings about how he would have given everything he owns just for someone to tell him he's not alone. That's exactly how I used to feel down at the altar. I would have given everything I own for God to deliver me from my homosexuality. But right now I want as many moments like this as I can get.

Robert takes my hand. We interlock fingers. He rubs my palm with his thumb, back and forth like a windshield wiper. With his thumb he says,

You're not alone. You have me now. I'm not alone anymore either. (79)

And this feeling is something that Vincent can apply to life in general and his newfound personal theology. He explains:

God knows I've given everything. He knows that for years I've come before Him with a pure heart, the way the Bible says you're supposed to, and I'm still as gay as the first time I knelt at the altar. For years, He hasn't changed me. Maybe that's my sign. Maybe He's been trying to send it to me all the time, just like Barry [Manilow] is saying. Maybe by refusing to change me, God has been trying to show me the truth. (79-80)

It should be noted here that Hardy's novel follows a different path from many of the books actually written in the 80s where the gay protagonist would suffer some unforeseen tragedy or die because of something related to his sexuality, whether it be AIDS or a gay bashing. Instead, Hardy takes a much more sensitive and nuanced approach by exploring the nature of Vincent's new theology and his relationship with Robert without falling prey to what could easily become a tragic end.

Finally, Vincent's relationship with Robert also permits him to accept himself both as gay and as a Christian:

I used to think God would save me from my homosexuality, but after the laying on of hands⁶, after spending the night in Robert's bed and almost every

⁶ In a Christian context, laying hands on a person is a symbolic act meant to invoke the Holy Spirit to inhabit a person and heal or bless them.

day of that week with him, I realize God did hear me pray to be delivered. He didn't answer the way I thought he would, but He did answer. (106)

Instead of implying that there is a choice *between* sexuality and religion, Hardy concludes, in the last few pages, that both elements of life can work in tandem to bring out a better and more fulfilling understanding of God. Vincent says it best when he confesses, "[s]ince the moment I quit trying to control my homosexuality, God has never left my side" (104).

4.2 *The God Box* (Alex Sanchez)

In *The God Box*, Alex Sanchez bypasses the element of character investigation somewhat by having an answer to the relationship between religion and sexuality already evident in the beginning of the text: Paul—the protagonist and narrator—states, “‘Sex and religion don’t mix,’ my grandma once told me. ‘The church should stay out of people’s pants’” (1). Thus, Sanchez is clear from the beginning: sexuality is something intrinsic that cannot be dictated by religious doctrine and theological argument. There is no slowly revealed exploration or investigation of sexuality in relation to the religious doctrine. Instead, the conclusion is presented within the first sentence and the rest of the text examines and validates this statement.

Sanchez introduces Paul as a very strictly raised Christian, with a firm understanding of church doctrine. Paul is influenced by a range of characters: his father, grandmother and his chosen family (Manuel, Angie and his Bible group). As in *Nothing Pink*, *The God Box* reveals the intense influence that religion has on children and adolescents during their development:

All through grade school I carried my Bible everywhere, memorizing whole chunks of Scripture, striving to show God how much I loved him. I'm not exactly sure why winning God's approval was so important to me, but it was.

(8)

This quotation reveals that Paul is going to be a difficult case, as he is seeking to win approval from a God that he has been taught hates homosexuality: "[Around the time that I hit puberty], I had begun to hear in church that homosexuality was a sin and that 'Sodomites' were destined to hell. I didn't want to sin and I definitely didn't want to be condemned to hell" (8). This situation mirrors the upbringing of many young people within churches and religious families, creating an identifiable terrain for teens reading the novel. The biggest problem with the doctrine taught to young adults is reflected in the experiences of Manuel—Paul's eventual boyfriend—throughout his adolescent development. Manuel tells Paul:

Ever since I first started going to church nursery school, I was taught that God loves me just as I am, just as my mom and dad love me, no matter what. So ... why on earth would a good and loving God create ten percent of people with a sex drive oriented toward the same gender, and at the same time condemn them to hell for it? (64)

This statement exemplifies a trend in more recent novels where protagonists use reason and logic to reconcile faith and sexuality, rather than simply rejecting religion outright. A statement from Paul's Grandmother clarifies this point: "I think that unless people are *told* to believe homosexuality and God are in conflict, there is no conflict" (171, emphasis added).

The process of reconciliation for Paul, however, is far from simple. Paul is a tormented character who goes through much emotional and spiritual trauma. And though he

is spared physical abuse, he still witnesses the aftermath of a hate crime when boys from their school beat Manuel in a homophobic attack. However, Paul's journey from self-hatred and fear of his possible homosexual identity to becoming a young man who accepts his sexuality within a Christian framework is an inspiring read. In the beginning of the novel, Paul relentlessly admonishes himself for having thoughts about other guys, has a full-time girlfriend of five years, and snaps an elastic band on his wrist every time he looks at another boy. But after he meets Manuel and begins to see that being gay and Christian might actually be possible, his inner monologue reveals his slowly changing attitude:

What would it feel like to have a boyfriend? I wondered. What would it feel like to dance with a boy?

Almost immediately, a wave of guilt washes over me. Once again, I wrote down my same prayer: *Dear Lord, please take away these feelings. You know which ones. In Jesus' name I ask you. Thank you. Amen.* (53)

But gradually Manuel plants the seeds of spiritual change and growth inside of Paul:

Manuel was taking every church view I'd heard against homosexuality and blowing it away—blowing *me* away. ... [A]s I wandered through the evening twilight toward my house, I found my annoyance turning into prayer. 'Could Manuel possibly be right?' I whispered to Jesus. (66)

Sanchez doesn't allow the answers to be simple. Some of the exploration Paul undertakes is unconventional, though effective. He has to be willing to break some of the rules he has been taught at church in order to confirm what he suspects about himself. On Manuel's suggestion, Paul does a little internet search for porn in a last-ditch effort to find out if he is indeed gay, or just confused. When he looks at the

websites for “Hot Hunks” and “Horny Babes” he knows pretty quickly which anatomy turns him on: “It wasn’t that the boobs and stuff were boring. Before that moment I had never actually seen a woman completely nude. ...[But] inside my pants I felt ... nothing. Zip. Zero. Nada” (121). And this discovery leads to yet more questions:

What if this wasn’t a phase? What if I never became attracted to women and yet didn’t want to sin by having sex with guys? Should I be celibate for all my life? Was that what God wanted for me? To never experience the warmth and love of someone else’s body or feel their heart beat against mine? (121)

These are questions Paul takes the time to explore, methodically and with scripture to identify who he is and how he should make his way in the future.

Unlike Vincent in *Nothing Pink*, who seems to be comfortable with changing his theology without any scriptural arguments—at least within the text—Paul takes the time to consult his Bible constantly and to question verse after verse before he is convinced. For example, one of the most strongly utilized passages against homosexuality within the novel—and even outside of the novel—is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This story causes much unease with Paul and his Bible study group, but is also the passage that truly allows Paul to begin to move forward in his search for a new personal theology. While studying his Bible at home one day, Paul reflects on what he has read:

I leaned back in my desk chair, staring at my cherished Bible. How could anyone take a story about mob violence, attempted gang rape, a God who doesn’t know what’s going on, sin that isn’t specified, a woman being nuked

to salt, and daughter-father incest, and use that story to condemn homosexuality?

And yet, hadn't I been taught for years to read the story that way? (84-5)

This passage reveals the link between being taught a certain way and being able to queer that mainstream message using personal experience and a fresh take. Paul is able to look at this passage after a while and declare, "I closed my Bible, exhausted and yet also unexpectedly calmed. Verses of scripture that had frightened me for years suddenly seemed far less intimidating" (86). And later on Paul can finally see that maybe the mainstream doctrine he has been taught isn't always flawless. There is room for error in the teachings of the Church: "[I]f the church and its interpretation of the Bible were wrong about homosexuality, then what else might they be saying that wasn't true? How could I trust *anything* they said?" (118).

And this reckoning with doubt is true for many young people—at least in fictional accounts—who have been brought up to simply trust the church in which they grow up. There is an expectation that one should simply listen and accept what the church says as truth, rather than learning to discuss, debate, and question the dogma. Paul's father, who has not gone to church in a long time, because of his bitterness over the death of his wife, does go to church with Paul one Sunday after Manuel is beaten. The pastor speaks out against homosexuality and the Gay-Straight Alliance being set up at the local high school. Paul's father looks at his son and realizes that he is not some sort of monster. As father and son prepare to leave the church service, the following situation occurs:

Pastor's gaze followed Pa and me. He had stopped preaching, almost as if he wanted to draw attention to us.

I hunched down in my collar as the entire congregation stared. Would Pastor use me as an example of a homosexual who turned his back on Christ?

Maybe he thought Pa and I were retreating in shame. In fact I kind of was.

And I figured Pa was too—ashamed of *me*.

But when Pa reached the aisle, he stopped and drew himself up. My Pa, who hated speaking in front of even small groups, said in a voice loud enough for all to hear, “Pastor, you’re wrong.” (221)

This is a huge moment for Paul who up to this moment has believed his father is ashamed of him. Paul is amazed at his father’s actions, his defense of Paul in church, and his protection and willingness to speak out in support of Paul and the entire congregation. The fact that his father speaks up against the church in this moment gives Paul a sort of permission to do his own bit of pushing back against the institution that has been pushing him down.

Another important figure who must be acknowledged in *The God Box* is Paul’s grandma, the woman whose advice opens the novel: “Sex and religion don’t mix....The church should stay out of people’s pants” (1). Having a figure of such integrity and importance in his life gives Paul permission to appreciate the complexities of being human and not always to submit to doctrine. Her unconditional love also shows Paul that being Christian does not require mandatory discrimination against homosexuals, a message that is evident, but not as convincing for Paul, through the behaviour of some of his school friends. When Paul confesses to his grandma that he is “in love ... with Manuel,” she simply and elegantly replies, “*Mi amor*, I’m so happy for you.... Now let yourself be happy too” (232). Throughout the novel, she is a strong and powerful figure in Paul’s life and her intelligence

and experience provide Paul with the support that Manuel cannot provide while in the hospital.

Thus, with the support of those he loves—both his father and his chosen family, his grandma and close friends—Paul learns to take up the Christianity he once knew, question it, manhandle it a bit, and eventually relate it to his own personal experiences so that he can continue to have faith in God, still love himself and live as an openly young gay Christian man.

4.3 *Thinking Straight* (Robin Reardon)

In *Thinking Straight*, Robin Reardon constructs a world directly related to the conflict surrounding ex-gay camps and ministries, a relatively recent cultural phenomenon in North America. The protagonist, Taylor Adams, has been sent by his parents to Straight to God, a ministry that provides therapy and reprogramming for young people involved in drugs, alcoholism, extreme violence, and homosexuality. During his time within the institution, Taylor never wavers in his belief that he can be homosexual and Christian. This surety is unique to *Thinking Straight*. Where most YA queer novels deal with a protagonist who is, in some way, struggling with identity issues, Taylor is not. His biggest concern is being able to convince those around him that trying to deprogram homosexuality is more harmful than helpful.

Before Taylor goes to the institution, however, and before he confronts his parents, he still has a few questions about Christianity, a topic that his friend Angela tries to help him understand. Angela's parents do not hold to a strict doctrine or church dogma, but instead

practice their faith in very personal ways, not submitting to rigid church doctrine. Taylor tries to grasp this in a brief dialogue with Angela early in the novel:

“I don’t get it. They have no religion, but they sort of believe in God, but they don’t believe in faith?”

“No, no, they have faith. It’s just much more—I don’t know, more free-form. So they don’t have a scripture they follow. And they don’t go to any church.”

“Wait. How can you have faith and not have a religion?”

“Well, Taylor, they aren’t the same thing. A religion is just a specific way of applying faith. (20)

The last sentence speaks to the way in which people can have individual personal theologies and use them to apply faith to life experience without having to subscribe to every sentence of a mainstream doctrine. But this does not translate well when Taylor’s parents find out that he is gay and dating a boy named Will.

While arguing with his father, Taylor proves that he is already in a strong position spiritually because he is able to stand up to his dad about his beliefs and his faith without backing down or questioning his own ideology. When his father claims that Taylor is unable to make any decisions about his own life because he is too young to know what he is talking about, Taylor responds,

‘I do so know what I’m talking about!’ My voice was nowhere near as calm as his. But I had more to lose. ‘I’ve spent a lot of time this year thinking about this, praying about this, and reading the Bible about this. I know where Satan is. And he’s not standing between me and God.’ (23)

His conviction is firm, and five pages later he still stands his ground against his parents even when it means he will be sent to the ex-gay institution.

[Taylor yells] “You’ve got to be kidding! You’re out of your mind! I won’t go. You can’t make me. And you can’t make me straight, you know.”

“You will go. And I don’t have to make you straight because you’re aren’t crooked. What you need is God’s help so you can understand that you’re confused.”

Confused was one thing I was not. “That’s bullshit!”

“Taylor!”

“I mean it, Dad. That’s crap. I know exactly who I am.”

“You don’t know anything. You’re still a child.” (28)

This exchange mirrors what happens in many coming-out stories. Parents are quick to suggest that their children are too young to know what they are—gay, straight, trans—and, as a result of this thinking Taylor attends Straight to God for therapy to become a good heterosexual Christian.

In her construction of Straight to God, Reardon creates a world full of interesting characters, including those who have created a secret society of homosexual and queer-supporting Christians, a rather dislikable boy who returns every year to stay out of prison, and a priest who rapes some of the boys in the belief that overindulgence in homosexual activity will somehow rid the teens of their unnatural desires (he is eventually found out and incarcerated). At one point, when Taylor is first involved in the secret group of gay-supporting young people, he ruminates on his freedom within this group compared to his lack of freedom in the institution of the Church: “It’s hard to take it all in. Plus I’m not used to

this kind of freedom, of being in a group where you can just say ‘Homosexuality is not a sin’ and not have someone jump down your throat” (182).

One of the characters who helps Taylor out during his stay at Straight to God is Nate. Nate provides a solid shoulder for Taylor to lean on and a sympathetic voice to get reassurance from. Nate wants Taylor to stay strong and just get through the summer so he can show other people within the institution and outside, that being gay is not something that precludes Christian faith; they can work together to form a cohesive gay-Christian identity. Nate reassures Taylor one day, saying, “You don’t buy into this stuff the way Reverend Bartle and Dr. Strickland do. You don’t even buy into it the way Charles does. *But you get Jesus*. You understand his message the way I do. You know he wants us to love each other and accept each other. Right?” ([emphasis added] 138). Nate continues later, “There are others here who feel the same way. There are others every year. Which is part of why I keep coming back. It’s not that the Bible is wrong. It’s that it’s being *used* wrong. It’s not a weapon ... It’s not an arsenal of weapons to use on each other” (138). Instead of trying to change their own personal theologies—the theologies they have constructed using a combination of their personal experiences and learned dogma—Nate and Taylor attempt to show others that it is possible to be queer and Christian.

Taylor is a character readers can look up to, and who exemplifies a strongly constructed identity that does not rely solely on religious dogma, but allows room for a queer sexual identity and a freedom to disagree with or at least question religious teachings. As teens reading this book will see, it is possible to have a personal spiritual identity and still adhere to a form of Christianity without having to abandon the sexual aspect of one’s identity.

4.4 Conclusions

Family dynamics play a large part in the development of personal belief systems and identity for young people, especially in Christian contexts where so much emphasis is placed on the makeup of the family unit: one mother and one father in a heterosexual marital bond. For gay and lesbian young people, such emphasis is difficult to reconcile with a personal identity that is contrary to the heteronormative ideal displayed in both the dynamics of their own families and within Christian dogma. What the authors of *Nothing Pink*, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight* show, however, is that it is possible to reclaim Christianity, personalize it, and still have a connection with God without having to deny or attempt to change a homosexual identity.

What this reconciliation between homosexuality and Christianity requires, though, is a complex and intimate engagement with dogma and scripture. Each of the three protagonists examined in this thesis must critically engage with Biblical evidence that seems to condemn them for being who they are, and with those who would attempt to use such scripture to keep them from being part of the Christian community that they grew up with. The next chapter will look more closely at the specific verses—or “clobber passages” as they are sometimes referred to—that are used most often to criticize and oppress those who fall outside of the heterosexual expectations put forth in Christian dogma.

Chapter 5: Reflecting On and Rebelling Against Christian Dogma

How do these texts reflect current values and public discourse presented in American society and Christian culture? In what ways do the protagonists in selected novels rebel against American Protestant Christian perceptions and expectations related to queerness and relationships?

This chapter looks closely at the ways in which the protagonists of the three sample texts rebel, or as Cheng (2011) might identify, transgress the boundaries and power structures of conservative American Protestant Christian churches particularly as the strictures of these institutions relate to queerness. A theoretical lens of queer theology informed by Judith Butler's gender performativity frames the discussion.

Mainstream Protestant doctrine assumes that because God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, that any sexual partnering which does not follow the man/woman pairing is unnatural and/or sinful. The creation story, told in Genesis 1:27, is the basis for this belief: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it'" (NIV). This is, of course, closely followed by the passage in Genesis 2:24, where the male-female relationship is described: "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (NIV). Because of these passages, the perpetuation of heteronormative thinking is rife within the Christian church. Christian dogma perpetuates the thought that deep down, all human beings are

created heterosexual, at least at the beginning, and that it is something sinful that has caused a turn toward the lie of homosexuality.

Of course, the most difficult and contested biblical passages (discussed earlier in the Introduction) are those in Genesis (the Creation story and the Sodom and Gomorrah story), Leviticus, Romans, and I Corinthians. These passages come up repeatedly, both within churches and within the novels in this study. Each of these scriptures has been isolated and used within Christian dogma to attack LGBT individuals and to perpetuate negative stereotypes that make places of worship unwelcoming and, at times, downright hostile to LGBT worshippers. The young protagonists in *Nothing Pink*, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight* attempt—and in many ways succeed in doing so—to rebel against dogma such as that discussed above and in Chapter One. However, in doing so they are subjected to greater hostility, disappointment from parents, enrollment in ex-gay therapies, and further attack upon their identities. Vincent, in *Nothing Pink*, feels great self-loathing at the thought that he has sexual feelings for other boys, while Paul, in *The God Box*, is witness to the anger and violence that results from homophobia and which creates a difficult coming-out process. And, Taylor, in *Thinking Straight*, is shipped off to a camp for going against the heterosexist dogma that his Protestant Christian parents believe. These responses, while fictional, are no less realistic than the responses of many parents and friends of gay teens in our own world, especially those who have been raised within a conservative Christian context.

Without necessarily being fully aware of it, young adults are constantly engaged in a struggle to accept their own identities in the shadow of the institutions that dictate how they should live and act. While on the surface, these struggles may seem similar to pre-twenty-first century fiction as discussed in the introduction, the endings in each of the three texts in

this study are, while perhaps not of the *happily ever after* persuasion, are at least *happy for now*. These struggles bring about growth, as youth are forced to come to their own conclusions about themselves, attempting to reconcile what these institutions tell them with what they know to be true about themselves; in some situations, this kind of reconciliation *seems* very nearly impossible. This chapter seeks to find the connections between fiction and reality, between the novels and American Protestant Christian culture—and in many ways, American culture at large, since so many cultural assumptions underpinning American life come from the Christian tradition. The novels will each be studied in depth to see how they mirror current American Christian assumptions regarding sexuality and relationships as well as how the characters transgress and struggle against such assumptions: This discussion is informed by the work of Butler—in terms of mainstream perceptions of gender and sexuality, based on acts and behaviours—and Trites—in terms of rebellion against institutions, in this case, churches and ex-gay ministries.

5.1 *Nothing Pink* (Mark Hardy)

“If I go down [to the altar] now, Momma will think I backslid.⁷ That while she’s been job hunting, I’ve been sneaking off with some new neighbor boy doing Sodom-and-Gomorrah things” (11). This example, very early in the text, reveals the complexity of Vincent in negotiating his perceived assumptions about Christian cultural expectations regarding his gendered behaviour and his sexuality. By going forward to the altar, Vincent

⁷ Backslid, in case there is a question as to the meaning here, is a commonly used term in Christian culture that means a person has, in some way, lapsed or fallen backward in his or her relationship with God—that he or she has lost interest in following the teachings of Jesus and the church.

feels that his mother will assume he has been doing something wrong, and so will other members of the congregation. Being the son of the pastor, member of the church congregation and conservative community assume that he must be a good boy who does little, if not anything, wrong. Linked to Vincent's actions in the church setting are his anxieties regarding how the church will judge his appearance. For example, Vincent believes everyone can tell there is something "queer" about him from his appearance—from his hairstyle and choice in clothing. When his father introduces Vincent and his mother to the new congregation—they have recently moved to a new town for the purposes of his father's work—Vincent can't help but feel scrutinized by the people around him, not only because of the Christian gaze, but also because of other cultural assumptions regarding how boys should look and act:

Daddy wasn't done with that introduction before half the congregation could tell about me. My hair is a dead giveaway. People sometimes think I'm a girl because of my feathered Farrah Fawcett hairdo, but I just can't cut my hair off. They can see the queer in every layer of hairspray. I see it, too, but I can't quit spraying Aqua Net. (12)

His hair is too feminine and it causes people to see him as feminine, so therefore he must be queer. At least, that is Vincent's understanding. Just by refusing to do his hair another way, however, Vincent is purposefully transgressing these assumptions and asserting agency, even if in a small way, taking control of the self he presents to others. His appearance and gender performance in public, or in this case in the church congregation, allows Vincent to create a version of himself that informs others of something deeper than just his external appearance.

Vincent's body becomes a site of cultural assumptions regarding his sexuality and gender. Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, writes

[G]ender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (5)

Butler's assertion that gender—and gendered assumptions regarding sexuality—are constructed as the result of intersections of different modes of thought is very much linked to Christianity: The Bible contains many passages that speak of gender and sexual dynamics in relationships, and it is the mix of these writings with contemporary social discourse and theory regarding sexual identities that can cause so much confusion for young people caught between the Christian community and American culture at large. Vincent is a fascinating representation of a young person in this confusing and marginal position.

Following his anxiety regarding approaching the altar⁸, Vincent starts thinking about Christian dogma concerning expected heterosexual marital relationships and individual sexual feelings, and specifically about his desires and the feelings he has never acted on:

I've never so much as held hands with a boy under a blanket at a football game. I've never kissed a boy behind my open locker door, or slow-danced to a Commodores song at a sweetheart dance. I've never lied to my teacher and said I had to go to the bathroom and instead slipped a love letter through the

⁸ In Western Protestant Christian churches, the altar is a symbolic space at the front of a church sanctuary, sometimes highly adorned and sometimes sparsely decorated. This space is usually used as a site for communion or symbolic sacrifice, a place to ask for forgiveness from God, either individually or as a group, through prayer.

slots of another boy's locker. So why am I going to hell? If I go down to the altar, what do I repent? (16)

Contemporary Christianity, in many cases, preaches against homosexuality as a series of acts as opposed to an acceptable sexual identity. Sedgwick notes, in "Epistemology of the Closet," that views about homosexuality shifted (at least in European thought at first) from "viewing same-sex sexuality as a matter of prohibited and isolated genital *acts* ... to viewing it as a function of stable definitions of *identity*" (55). Christian assumptions, then, are certainly difficult to adhere to for young gay teens since they speak in direct opposition to what so much of North America now understands about sexuality and identity. So, what is a young Christian gay boy to do when he has not actually followed through on any of these assumed sinful acts? For what is Vincent to repent if he has never held hands with another boy, kissed, or written a love letter?

Vincent's inner monologue in the first chapter offers the reader much insight into his thought processes; however, the decisions he makes at this point cause him confusion later in the text. For example, after meeting Robert in church, Vincent thinks to himself, "I will not go anywhere with Robert Ingle. Won't even be seen in public with him. I can never be his friend, let alone his boyfriend. It's a rule: *Flaming queers shall not be friends*" (27). The rule that Vincent comes up with is based on the assumptions that his father preaches in church—on what the church views as the sin of sexual acts and specifically homosexual acts. Identity—that is identifying as homosexual—is not really addressed within the Christian community. It is argued here that this is because actions (in this case, homosexual acts) have the possibility of being repented and the behaviour changed. Identity, on the other hand, is often considered an unchangeable part of the person.

Another dogmatic assumption addressed within *Nothing Pink* is that homosexuality is caused by a demon or some sort of evil influence on a person. When Vincent's parents find his gay magazine and begin to pray, the first thing his father prays is "[i]n the name of Jesus... we cast you out," (84) and his mother continues with "[y]es, Jesus ... Deliver him, Lord" (85). This type of reaction to a queer young person is not uncommon in a number of Christian denominations, and it can be traumatizing. Vincent expresses this fear to the reader:

What if I really am possessed by demons? What if Satan disguised his voice so he sounds like God and is deceiving me to think I'm okay? The Bible warns that he comes as a wolf in sheep's clothing. Even the righteous will be deceived. Who am I to think God speaks the truth to me? Maybe I am the pervert they fear. (85)

Trites speaks to Vincent's confusion in the text, explaining in *Disturbing the Universe* that "[c]hildren and adolescents taught to believe in the omnipotence of an unseen patriarchal deity who must be obeyed are indeed receiving ideological training that represses them" (41). But these repressive messages are not *all* bad. Regarding negotiating social institutions, Trites writes: Adolescents "learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function" (3). What does this mean for Vincent, then? It means that though he is being repressed by the discourse of the Christian church and the doctrine that his parents follow, he can, and does, use these experiences to explore and negotiate power structures he might not otherwise have considered. If his parents were not so determined to change him and if he was not so determined to change

earlier in the novel, Vincent would not have been able to come to the same conclusion that he does later when his parents lay hands on him and try to pray out his homosexuality:

My parents' sweaty palms smash into my skin. I used to be as desperate for me to change as they still are. But it doesn't add up. Either God doesn't have the power to change me or He just won't. I know my gayness breaks their hearts, but I'm kind of glad he hasn't changed me. (85)

Nothing Pink speaks to the discursive construction of gender—how gender is constructed, socially, through rhetoric and discourse of what it means to be a man—and the body as a site on which cultural assumptions are projected, as Butler suggests in her theoretical work. And the power dynamics that Vincent must face and struggle against serve to help him construct a strong and personal understanding of God, Christianity, and his own sexuality. By utilizing his own agency and transgressing the assumptions of his parents and the church, Vincent is able to construct himself with a more thorough understanding of the powers that seek to repress his gender performance and sexual identity. The novel also speaks against very real assumptions within the Christian community about homosexuality and gender, as well as the defining of sexuality as an action rather than an identity, which allows for “treatments” of sexuality that conform to Biblical actions such as repentance, the laying on of hands, and praying out demons and evil spirits. And even though it is set three decades back in time, the Christian assumptions are still evident today.

5.2 *The God Box* (Alex Sanchez)

Sanchez's novel reflects a number of Protestant Christian institutions and reactions to homosexuality in American culture: The emergence of ex-gay ministries in the late twentieth

century, starting with *Love In Action* (1973); the emergence of the Metropolitan Community Church in the United States; gay bashing, and reactions to homosexuality of a conservative Protestant church. The book is at times didactic, but for some readers it will reflect very prominent and relatable experiences of growing up gay in a contemporary Christian household. The first and most important aspect of Paul's connection with Christianity is the community he has been raised in and the friends that he has made. The small town atmosphere of Paul's teenage years enables the flourishing of many current conservative assumptions that are made about people based on their personal and institutional connections.

Much is assumed by the community based on relationships and personal associations, including friends, family relationships, and church affiliations:

In our town, the church that you went to defined what group you belonged to—kind of like whom you sat with at lunch. It seemed like we had a church on almost every corner. When meeting someone for the first time, folks would ask, “Where do you worship?” (44)

This sense of connection between perceived identity and religious affiliation is further reinforced among the group of friends Paul has at school. All belong to a Bible club, which is conservative in nature: “Our club advisor, Vice Principal Russell, left us pretty much alone, probably figuring we were good Christian kids unlikely to get into any trouble” (22). Christianity in this context is associated with personality traits such as being *good* and *wholesome*. But these assumptions may not withstand challenges to one's strongly held beliefs. For example, when the new student Manuel arrives at Paul's school, rather than being welcomed to a Christian community, he is subjected to snide remarks regarding the depravity of homosexuals—“‘They're wolves in sheep's clothing,’ Cliff agreed” (26)—and

assumptions regarding interpretations of scripture. Though the area of scriptural interpretation is a bit of a minefield—“[s]ometimes it seemed that if you looked hard enough, you could find a Bible verse to justify anything”—the consensus among the majority of Christians in the novel seems to be that homosexuality is a sin, whether you play “Proof-text volleyball” or not (26). Dogmatic assumptions such as these can lead to a number of difficulties for young gay Christians who want to come out to friends and family but who are afraid that they will be seen as deceived by Satan or sexually depraved, much as Vincent is seen by his parents in *Nothing Pink*. But, as also discussed in Hardy’s narrative, queer sexuality is often seen by Christian institutions as an action or series of actions rather than as an identity, and this comes up clearly in *The God Box*.

Paul shows up at his church to discuss his possibly queer orientation with the pastor, but the reaction he gets is not quite what he is hoping for. The pastor, instead of attempting to comfort or help Paul, has only this to say: “You’re going to need help” (133). Paul receives a few pamphlets about ex-gay ministries, one entitled “*No Longer Gay* and another *God’s Love Won Out*” (133). To many readers who have not been exposed to these sorts of pamphlets, the names might be viewed as simply a fictional creation by Sanchez. The truth, however, is that there is a ministry called *Love Won Out*—a division of Exodus International—that is sponsored through a major American Christian ministry, Focus on the Family. The mission statement of *God’s Love Won Out* from the text is “to preach the Good News of the ex-gay community” while *Love Won Out* in real life has a very similar mission statement, “to transform the lives of those impacted by homosexuality and lead people into freedom in Jesus Christ” (n.p.). The *No Longer Gay* title is also remarkably similar to a publication from author Jeff Konrad in 1987, entitled *You Don’t Have to Be Gay*. Sanchez is

not simply making up content, but mirroring, within his text, Christian ministries and other materials that have come out of a long Protestant Christian tradition of attempting to change the orientation of homosexuals.

Sexuality, as presented in *Nothing Pink*, is seen primarily as an act of sex rather than as an identity, making it easier, from a Christian perspective, to change gay people—behaviour can be changed, but identity cannot, at least not as easily. Ex-gay ministries are also of the opinion that those who are homosexual are broken in some way, damaged by a difficult past or by some lie that has been fed to them by secular society. This assumption is shown vividly through a discussion between Eric, a young man from an ex-gay ministry, and Paul:

“Well,” [Eric from the ex-gay ministry] clarified, “we don’t believe anyone is truly gay. We’re just broken, wounded, and have deep-seated gender-identity confusion—GIC—which is usually the result of broken relationships with our parents, sexual abuse, rejection from peers, or childhood trauma causing same-sex attraction, SSA.” (144)

Through this discussion Paul starts questioning the assumptions of his pastor and the ex-gay ministry. He begins a spiritual and psychological journey that allows him to be an agent of change, creating a new and stronger identity for himself that shows who he really is. While listening to Eric talk about the ex-gay ministry he is part of, Paul’s mind starts wandering:

Even though Eric had barely started speaking, my thoughts already began to scramble. *Do I have deep-seated GIC?* But I’d never felt confused about my gender identity. I’d always wanted to be a guy, not a girl. And I’d never been

sexually abused. Furthermore, I knew lots of [straight] people at school who had broken relationships with their parents. (145)

By seeing that the majority of Protestant Christian institutions Paul is exposed to and challenged by, as well as the ex-gay ministry that tried to recruit him, base their efforts for change on untrue or misguided assumptions, Paul is able to find within himself the strength to see that the Christian dogma he once adhered to so diligently can be mistaken.

Paul decides that he can put aside and move beyond the assumptions of those he once called friends, and the institution he once claimed as his church, and move forward to a place of self-acceptance. This leads him to further explore the possibilities of finding a church that speaks to him as a young gay male—whole and loved—rather than as a broken individual in need of fixing. The church that Paul finds is the one that Manuel attends. The description of the church as close-knit and welcoming is similar to some more contemporary denominations such as the United Church of Christ and Metropolitan Community Churches. And because this new church is more liberal in its teachings, Paul does not have to fully abandon his Protestant Christian upbringing. He can use it, instead, to complement the teachings of this new, more inclusive church. He feels much more comfortable and able to be himself:

On Sundays we started going with Manuel's family to his "welcoming" church, a much smaller congregation on the other side of town ... Maybe most importantly, in Pastor Ruth's congregation I could be myself without people judging me. It was the one public place where Manuel and I could hold hands and not feel the least bit afraid. (244-5)

Sanchez shows in the text how Christian institutions can be repressive, but he also follows the assertions of Trites regarding the necessity for teens to fight against the same institutions

that dominate their lives and yet which also teach them how to look at the world. By transgressing the dogmatic assumptions of his old church, his old friends, and his school, Paul is able to construct an identity for himself which he is no longer afraid to show in his new church, and hopefully the community at large. And being afraid of an identity is something no teenager should feel, especially when being brought up in an institution that is supposed to teach grace, forgiveness, and love. These themes are explored with even greater depth in Robin Reardon's *Thinking Straight*.

5.3 *Thinking Straight* (Robin Reardon)

Taylor, the protagonist of Reardon's book, is unique in comparison to the protagonists of *The God Box* and *Nothing Pink*. Taylor is firm in his belief that his queer orientation is not wrong and is not something that needs to be changed. The focus of this novel is Taylor's exploration of scripture and assumptions of Christianity so that he can help *others* understand that homosexuality is not a sin and is not the result of a broken home or troubled past. The text confronts similar assumptions to the previous two texts, serving to strengthen the understanding of mainstream Christian ideology through repetition by various authors in stories of different times, locations, and racial backgrounds. But Taylor, right from the first chapter, is defending his identity to those around him and proving the strength of his created self. But this identity means little to those of importance around him, such as his parents, his church congregation, and his pastor. These characters go back to the often repeated Christian assumption that sexuality is linked more with acts than identities.

The pastor of Taylor's church says, "Your father tells me you haven't yet engaged in fornication, so we're catching things early. Confusion can be cleared up more easily if sin

has not yet occurred” (26). The two assumptions at play immediately are the idea that since Taylor has not acted on his same-sex attractions, he can still be fixed, and the second assumption is that Taylor’s sexuality is not a viable identity but is rather the result of confusion. The pastor goes on to say, “Homosexuality is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord, and there’s no way he would have made you that way. Satan is responsible for this, but you are responsible for casting him out” (27). This is the same thought at the heart of both of the other novels. Vincent’s parents try to pray out the gay, and Paul is accused of being deceived by Satan. These assumptions are strong and the fact that they play out across all three texts only serves to show how difficult the assumptions are to get rid of or go up against because they are so deeply rooted in Christian tradition. Reardon, not satisfied to show these presumptions only once, has the character of the pastor reiterate the assumptions again later in the same scene, when he talks about Straight to God and the views the camp holds:

[Straight to God is] associated with our church only loosely, but they hold similar views when it comes to the importance of right behavior and how to reinforce it in troubled youth. The program can be especially helpful for boys like you, who are already trying their best to abide by God’s laws in every other respect. I’m going to recommend that you spend some time there this summer, Taylor. (27)

What Reardon has in her text that the other two novels do not is a protagonist who does not want to change at any point, even early in the story. Upon his arrival at Straight to God, Taylor is asked to kneel and pray before leaving his regular life behind for the summer. But Taylor does not pray for what the pastor and director of the institution most likely assume he

will: “I prayed, all right. Jesus, I begged, get me through this.... Don’t let me forget Will. Don’t let me forget who I am” (30). From the start, Taylor refuses to change who he is and what he believes is an acceptable way of expressing love and affection.

Taylor finds secret support among other teens at the camp who believe that it is possible to go against mainstream Protestant Christian assumptions and still remain a Christian. At one of the secret meetings, this group focuses specifically on the topic of dogmatic assumptions. A girl named Jessica speaks up, saying to one teen, “You’re assuming that everything Jesus said is in the New Testament. But there were lots of other writings [not included in the Bible],” and a boy named Dave follows up, “You’re assuming that what’s in the New Testament is correct and complete, when we know lots of stuff has been changed since the originals were written down” (180). This excerpt has Taylor and the other teens breaking down a common Christian assumption that the Bible is infallible, to be read literally, and/or inerrant. By doing so, the group is creating its own discourse of Christianity and their own doctrine that allows them to be who they are without having to change for the sake of mainstream Christian dogma.

Showing opposition to the thinking of ex-gay institutions, Reardon speaks directly against such programs by using scripture. For example, when Taylor is discouraged by what is happening to some of the other boys in the program, Nate gives him a pep talk:

In Matthew, chapter twenty-two, verse thirty-nine, Jesus says that the second greatest commandment, after loving God is ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Well, you can’t do that unless you already love yourself. Jesus commands us to love each other, and he compares it to loving ourselves. So, Taylor, love yourself. Jesus commands it. And Dr. Strickland’s approach stops that,

because he's trying to convince boys like Ray and Charles that God can't love them as they are, and if God can't love you, how can you love yourself? (141)

Thus, Reardon argues, through scripture, that, it is acceptable to love a queer identity just as much as a straight identity. And for Reardon, this seems to be the main point she wishes to convey to teens outside of the fictional world of *Thinking Straight*.

5.4 Conclusions

Using queer theology and, specifically, queer as transgressive action as in the theoretical framework informed by the work of Butler on gender performativity, a close reading of the three texts identified that each of the three novels addresses very similar topics from varied and unique perspectives. Each protagonist does, in some way, manage to challenge the dogmatic assumptions of Christianity, and specifically the views of their own churches or parents. The reactions to these transgressions are eerily similar in each book, though with some small differences. In *Nothing Pink* and *Thinking Straight*, it is the parents who are mainly seen as the main reactionary force against the protagonist's thinking outside of the rigid doctrine that has been the basis of his life into the teenage years. In *The God Box*, the negative reactions were similar to the other two novels, but the reactionary forces are Paul's friends, with his father and *abuelita* actually being the supportive forces.

Current events and institutions also play a large role in *The God Box* and *Thinking Straight*, with Sanchez and Reardon speaking very directly to ex-gay ministries and anti-gay rhetoric within Christian churches. *Nothing Pink* is much less current in what it speaks to since it is set in the late '70s, but much of what the church preaches and what Vincent was forced to act in opposition to is still very much a part of contemporary Protestant discourse in

America. The protagonists in each of the novels build up their personal identities by working against the assumptions of the Christian worlds they inhabit. And in fighting against the discourse of Christian assumptions current within each fictional—yet still very realistic—world, Paul, Vincent, and Taylor are each able to strengthen their understanding of the God they feel they know and the sexual identity they believe is not a sin.

Chapter 6: Erasing Boundaries? (Or Not?)

Have the authors of the three primary texts under study managed to queer their position within the YA genre in any way? Or do they still follow heteronormative and Christian assumptions throughout the novels? What implications does the queering or failure to queer each book have on the issues they are exploring?

As explained in the Introduction, “queering” can refer to the destabilizing of one or more aspects of any given topic, but here it refers to the destabilizing of the topic of sexuality and intersecting topics, such as Christianity, within the YA texts *The God Box*, *Nothing Pink*, and *Thinking Straight*. Loughlin and Cheng describe one aspect of queering as erasing boundaries. This notion is informed by Butler (1993) who describes gender as a performative act that opposes views of gender as essentialist or natural, and Sedgwick (1990) who explores the deconstruction of normative ideas of the closet. Cheng, in *Radical Love* (2011) writes “‘queer’ destabilizes that which is perceived as ‘normal’ identity [...] by erasing the boundaries between such polarities and thus symbolizing a ‘difference, a divergence’” (8-9). Erasing boundaries, then, explores the destabilization and deconstruction of heteropatriarchal Christianity. Reardon, Sanchez, and Hardy each explore this very destabilization within each of their texts.

These novels feature queer protagonists who transgress queer Christian dogma in their personal lives so that they can (more) peacefully co-exist as self-identified LGBT teens within a Protestant Christian context that does not often see them as whole and natural human beings. But in the end, are the books themselves working outside of or within a

heteronormative framework? Do they in fact *erase boundaries*? And does this really matter? These questions are at the centre of this chapter and of the interrogation of heteronormative dynamics within each of the three texts.

Roberta Trites and Thomas Crisp, both prominent scholars within the YA and queer studies fields, have both questioned the ability of queer YA texts to overcome heteronormative and heterosexist social assumptions. Trites argues, in her article “Queer Discourse and the Young Adult Novel,” that “all too often the rhetoric these [queer] texts employ to construct gay discourse is more repressive than it is liberating” (143). Crisp concurs in his article, “From Romance to Magical Realism,” stating that queer YA fiction “ultimately reinscribe[s] heteronormativity through the assumption that monogamous coupling is the goal of LGBTQ youth” (333). He goes on to say that “[r]ather than ‘mainstream’ acceptance of non-normative sexual identities, [...] representations of gay characters are frequently molded to fit into a heteronormative frame” (334). *Nothing Pink*, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight* are texts intended for a queer audience and that queer theological assumptions, Christian dogma, and expectations of Christian attitudes toward homosexual teens. But through all that, have the texts actually gone so far as to make for themselves a place outside of the heteronormative literary box?

Before going into a more thorough exploration of each novel, I must answer the “why does it matter?” that will inevitably affect the reading of these textual assessments. To simply say that the novels by Hardy, Sanchez, and Reardon conform to heteronormative assumptions may prove correct, but why does it matter? I argue that the effectiveness of a text can be linked to its ability to break from traditional expectations based on genre. If a text queering an idea—in this case Protestant Christian dogma and heterosexist

assumptions—attempts to do so within the framework it is trying to destabilize, can it be considered effective? An example of this is outlined by Crisp in regards to the use of homophobic language to make queer texts realistic:

The intention here is not to suggest that any author of young adult fiction is endorsing or approving of homophobia, but simply to draw attention to the fact that many titles rely upon homophobia and homophobic discourse to provide readers with a sense of ‘realism.’ (339)

Authors of many texts attempt to “normalize” homosexuality, but in reality the use of homophobic discourse in these texts only serves to show that homophobia is “real” and that it is part of the queer experience. The purpose of showing realism in these texts ultimately provides youth with the idea that homophobia and homophobic discourse are an inevitable part of life as a queer teen. The same can be said of books about queer subjects that ultimately conform to heteronormative expectations. By not actually engendering the discourse being explored, the books are effectively showing that to be gay still requires succumbing to heteronormative, and in many ways Protestant Christian, relationship dynamics and behaviour.

Nothing Pink, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight* are all about gay teens exploring their faith and Christian upbringing, but they are also about the protagonist finding—or in the case of *Thinking Straight*, staying with—another boy in a monogamous, heteronormative relationship. What these queer texts attempt to do is challenge the idea that being gay is not sinful, but certain expectations are still in place, namely that gay sex should not be engaged in, or that if it is, it be within the confines of a monogamous relationship. As discussed in the Introduction and the analysis of queer YA texts from the 80s and 90s, the idea of expressing

homosexual feelings in terms of sexual acts was very much taboo and usually ended in a fade-to-black scenario where the reader was deprived of any validation that same-sex intimacy is legitimate. Trites, in “Queer Discourse and the Young Adult Novel,” referring to the 1969 novel, *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, writes that the protagonist “simply cannot perceive or express homosexuality in terms of physical or emotional pleasure” (145). And later in the same article she continues, stating that “readers—gay or not—should feel a sense of catharsis or validation or acceptance of homosexuality after reading [a] novel. But the genre has a well-entrenched tradition of delegitimizing its own agenda” (149). “Queer Discourse,” published in 1998, gave me some hope that things might have changed as I turned to explore twenty-first century YA texts with queer content. Unfortunately, the three novels under study in this thesis, while they explore homosexuality in relation to Christian dogma and assumptions, do not afford same-sex couples much exploration of physical intimacy. This is problematic as it conforms to the very notion that is so often accepted in Protestant Christian dogma: “You can be gay and we’ll accept you, just don’t do anything about it.”

6.1 Acts vs. Identities

In *Nothing Pink*, Vincent undergoes a dilemma about this very subject of acts versus identity as he laments, “I’ve never so much as held hands with a boy under a blanket at a football game. I’ve never kissed a boy behind my open locker door, or slow-danced to a Commodores song at a sweetheart dance. [...] If I go down to the altar, what do I repent?” (16). The novel’s premise rests on the idea that Vincent is able to analyze, rebel against, and reclaim a queered form of Christian dogma by which to live, but there is still an underlying

idea at the beginning that homosexual acts are problematic. If he never “did” anything, then what should he repent? Identifying as a queer individual does not prove troublesome for Vincent, but doing anything would require repentance. In the end, after some kissing and cuddling, Vincent and Robert end up as a couple. Biblical scriptures are examined and decisions are made; prayers are sent up and hope for change is exhausted; and in the end Vincent determines that being gay is not a sin, and neither is being with Robert. He says, “Now that I’ve loved and kissed Robert, I’m pretty sure the biggest thing wrong with being gay is that the Bible says it’s wrong” (106).

Hardy also utilizes language that still identifies Vincent and Robert as “others” within a naturally heterosexual world that follows strict assumptions of acceptability regarding behaviour and relationships. But even within their relationship, Vincent and Robert still hold to the boundaries of sexual exploration set forth within Christian dogma. They may be a gay couple, but they are still a good Christian gay couple, refraining from sex outside of their more committed relationship. Of course, within the confines of the time-frame in which the novel is set, gay marriage would not have been an option anyway. But even outside of the relationship dynamics, Vincent is portrayed as “other” by descriptions of his appearance and actions which do not conform to the traditional views of masculinity so often pushed on young people. These expectations and assumptions will be explored in greater detail in the next section of this chapter.

The above examples are not to say that *Nothing Pink* is a bad book or that it is unsuccessful in queering Christian dogma in the text, but to show that there are a number of problematic issues that keep the book from moving beyond the mould Hardy seems to be attempting to break. Hardy navigates difficult terrain, especially by moving his novel back to

a time that was even more difficult for homosexual youth than today, and he manages to give positive examples of rebelling against, and yet being able to reclaim Christianity without abandoning sexuality or sacrificing faith for a queer identity. What I mean to show through the previous discussion, however, is that by still following heteronormative and Christian assumptions regarding sexuality, physicality, and gender performance, the novel remains in the realm of heterosexist literature, but with a gay protagonist. Hardy is unable to queer his novel enough to move beyond the themes he troubled within Vincent's world and it is, therefore, problematic to consider the book queer beyond the LGBT content.

Alex Sanchez's text is similar in this regard. In *The God Box*, assumptions of sexual acts are revealed during a Bible study session that Paul is attending. One girl in the group, Elizabeth, makes a comment that shows how Christian dogma can become just a natural part of everyday thought: "If you accept gays [...] you're saying what they do is okay" (27). There is an immediate association made by Elizabeth and other Christians in the group between "gay" and homosexual acts. Another dogmatic assumption is that homosexual individuals do not know Jesus or are not *really* Christian. Evidence of this shows up shortly after the Bible study fiasco when Paul is wondering about Manuel: "It surprised me that [Manuel] knew the passage. I still didn't get how he could accept being gay and consider himself a Christian. Did he pray? Did he really know Jesus?" (32). While not immediately evident here, much of the assumption about homosexuals being unable to be truly Christian stems from the idea that because they are gay, they are constantly sinning until they overcome their homosexuality, but their sexuality is still defined by the sexual acts. Sanchez follows much the same path as Hardy in having his protagonist(s) rebel against, rewrite, then rebel against Christian dogma before falling into a monogamous relationship.

Reardon, in *Thinking Straight*—possibly the most queer of the three texts—makes a slightly different argument from Hardy’s, choosing to look at the possible reasons why homosexuality would have been considered a sin in the time of Moses in the Old Testament. One of Taylor’s allies at Straight to God, at a meeting one night, describes the problematic notion of being homosexual in a time when procreation was a necessity:

If you had lived two thousand years ago and you’d refused to marry a woman and have kids because you’re gay, [someone else’s] children would have to take care of you when you got old.... [W]ould you be endangering the community by setting that example? If seven percent or more of the people in a community deliberately didn’t have kids, what then? (181)

The argument is still about acts versus identities, but in this case the act is for the purpose of procreation, which, in the Biblical context, was a heterosexual necessity to further the human race. Reardon, through Nate, declares that we are in different times, with different views, and different understandings, but still stuck on heterosexual assumptions based on outdated dogma. By using this train of thought, it is possible to see homosexuality in a contemporary context as something that cannot be dictated by a text—the Bible—with millennia-old assumptions.

What Reardon does differently than Sanchez or Hardy, however, is allow her characters to experience physical intimacy beyond the kiss or cuddle. Taylor and Will are able to explore sex and intimacy as neither of the other two couples in Sanchez and Hardy are able to. Taylor is still somewhat haunted by scripture, but that is clouded by the experience of sexual intimacy:

All I can say is, there was some voice in the back of my head trying to tell me how evil I was, how much I was hurting my immortal soul and Will's. It was trying to sneak in there with Bible verses about homosexuals not being able to enter the Kingdom of God.... But I could barely hear that voice, try as it might to break through, because of the one that was screaming, "Yes! Oh God oh God oh God. Yes!" (9)

Even though passages like this are in her book, Reardon is still cautious, in some ways. Taylor says, "I don't know if it comes from being a teenager, or being gay, or being a gay teenager, but [...] I just wanted sex. And in particular, sex with Will" (8). Reardon gives herself a textual buffer that keeps her out of trouble from either gay or straight readers who might have an issue with the intimate moments. Assumptions of gay promiscuity are shoved away by the reference to just "being a teenager," but assumptions of teenagers being aroused by anyone are redirected as Taylor admits that he wants, specifically, "sex with Will."

The confines of sexual discourse and heteronormative labels are not something that can be easily broken, if they can at all at this point in time without a major overhaul of language and discourse. The discourse used in these texts is not limited to descriptions of sexuality and Christian dogma, however. The language in these texts is also subject to the confines of description within the binary male/female system that is currently the norm.

6.2 Gendered Performance

Corinne Wickens, in her doctoral dissertation on *Queering Young Adult Literature: Examining Sexual Minorities in Contemporary Realistic Fiction Between 2000-2005*, writes, "As characters question and struggle with issues of sexual identity and desire, they also

struggle with heteronormative constraints regarding gender” (92). The same is true not only with characters within literature, but with the authors who write the novels. Authors are confined, in many ways, to heteronormative discourse regarding gender and the performance of gender. Without creating new language or some new form of gender-neutral pronoun, however, writing within a framework which relies on assumptions of a male/female binary is inevitable in many ways. Hardy, Sanchez, and Reardon are attempting to queer certain social and religious assumptions within the novel form, but by using language that relies on the assumptions they are attempting to queer, and this is problematic in some ways. This is not explicitly stated by any of the authors, but the representations they present allow for such an interpretation.

Vincent’s gender performance, to return to Butler, is described in a way that makes him automatically “gay” without even having to admit to liking other boys or having to engage in sexual acts. Vincent describes himself this way: “My hair is a dead giveaway. People sometimes think I’m a girl because of my feathered Farah Fawcett hairdo.... They can see the queer in every layer of hairspray” (12). He goes on about his gender performance a few pages later:

Is it evil to walk and talk like a girl? There’s not one word in the Bible about the sin of fumbling a football. There’s no Thou shalt not spend Saturday night helping your mom curl her hair [...] while the cake you just made from scratch fills the house up with air so chocolaty it covers the beauty-shop stink of home-permanent solution. (16)

The way Vincent describes himself is, in its own way, troublesome for the book. As Crisp describes in “From Romance to Magical Realism,” books often employ certain homophobic

or heterosexist discourse to describe events or people. This is the case with Hardy, describing Vincent's appearance using descriptions reserved traditionally for female characters, and by showing Vincent taking part in feminine activities such as cake baking and hairdressing. He is also unable to conform to traditionally masculine performances, such as sports, by being unable to catch a football. Vincent, though eventually affirmed to be OK in the end of the novel, is being called out as somehow less of a man because of his non-conformity to expected masculine qualities, making the descriptions inherently problematic.

While Sanchez, in *The God Box*, doesn't go as much into specifics of gendered performance as Hardy, there is still exploration of reputations and assumptions based on dress and association. Manuel, when he first shows up in homeroom, is assumed to be gay because of his appearance: "Tiny hoops pierced both ears and his left eyebrow—surprising for our conservative little west Texas town, where even a single earring could get a guy accused of 'going gay'" (2). By accessorizing with earrings, something often associated with girls more than guys, Manuel is automatically labeled without even having to say anything, do anything, or admit to being gay. When Manuel and Paul sit at the same table one day at lunch, another assumption takes place based on Paul's association with the new guy. Paul, simply by hanging out with Manuel, a self-professed gay boy, is destabilizing assumptions about his own gender and assumed heterosexual identity. Paul is rebuked at one point for not warning one boy that Manuel is gay. The same boy warns Paul, "Watch out you don't get a reputation" (22). By simply sitting at the same table as another queer individual, a person is automatically accused of not following assumptions of how a real man would act and who a real man would hang out with.

Robin Reardon works similarly in her novel, with Taylor understanding himself as “different” because of the way he is perceived by a friend after a non-masculine act. Taylor, while skinny dipping with his friend Jim, has an overwhelming desire to touch his friend in a very non-heterosexual way. This action gives the friend a shock and causes outrage, followed by estrangement. Taylor later goes through the situation in his head and tries to understand what his old friend might have been going through:

Imagining things from his side, it might be like he suddenly found out a person he thought he knew really well actually came from outer space. Or that I was a girl, and not a boy like him at all. Because, really, even though I’m not a girl, in one very important way I’m not a boy like him. And I wanted him the way a girl would. (4)

Taylor’s behaviour is judged by members of the community in opposition to that of a normal boy. His actions are described as those of a girl toward a boy instead of a “normal” boy toward another boy. This makes him girl-like, and definitely not like other boys. Taylor’s “difference” comes from an association with non-masculine actions, and these actions are considered by some other Christians as even more wrong when placed in a Christian context where boys just don’t do such things with other boys.

Performance of gendered characteristics is important to understand ways of identifying as male or female, gay or straight, masculine or feminine. By acting in some way contrary to hegemonic assumptions of masculinity, one is automatically labeled as something less than. This classification as something lesser in these texts automatically gets read as the character’s being gay, and therefore being something contrary to Christian and heteronormative social understandings of what it means to be a true, heterosexual male. The

language used to describe these qualities in the three protagonists is closely linked to the idea of a male/female binary, and cannot, therefore, be considered truly queer, since the authors rely on the same discourse as is used in other texts to describe “normal” girls and boys, but simply in opposing terms.

6.3 Conclusions

The three novels, though providing a queering of assumptions regarding sexuality and Christianity within the story arc, still maintain heterosexual norms; as girl meets boy in so much teen fiction, boy meets boy in these books, and the relationships still follow the same heteronormative rules. The books also work to queer Christian dogma, but still define the relationships within the text through a heteronormative Christian framework, thus somewhat discrediting the message they are attempting to set out for the reader. This is not to say that the authors are guilty of some offence, but simply that they are working within the confines of a system that requires a much greater overhaul before any true queering can take place within the heterosexist framework that society allows, even in books about sexually queer subjects.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 General Conclusions from the Research

Religion is the catalyst that encourages young adults to engage sincerely in an internal dialogue about why they believe what they do and how their life experiences affect the development of personal spirituality and sexual identity. Without serious internal probing into the “why?” questions, young people navigating adolescence can easily find themselves being influenced by exterior institutional teachings without the benefit of a personal spirituality. It is difficult, then, to consider Christianity merely as either a good or bad force in the life of young adults. Instead, transgressing religious expectations can lead them to search for answers outside of the doctrines and dogma so often taught in religious institutions.

Queer characters in YA literature exemplify the struggle of youth against social institutions, in this case, they transgress the boundaries of the conservative, American Protestant church. Roberta Trites perhaps says it best in *Disturbing the Universe*: “The chief characteristic that distinguishes adolescent literature from children’s literature is the issue of how social power is deployed during the course of the narrative” (2). In Queer YA literature, the social powers are sometimes those of a political or religious nature that are deployed in such a way as to deny the character his or her ability to develop a sexual identity with which to be comfortable. Often, “a major developmental crisis can occur when gay and lesbian adolescents attempt to establish an identity in a society that devalues their sexual orientation” (Vare and Norton 190).

Whether in a social, political, or religious context, queer youth have to deal with repression from a plethora of outside sources. Bullying in school, political oppression, and

religious condemnation are all elements in the life of queer young adults. But is this *all* bad? Or is the struggle against institutions that propagate certain ways of thinking and being a way for young adults to become more involved in their personal growth and identity formation? And how is the Queer YA novel going to help in these situations? Roberta Trites proposes that

[t]he YA novel, with its questioning of social institutions and how they construct individuals, was not possible until the postmodern era influenced authors to explore what it means if we define people as socially constructed objects rather than as self-contained individuals bound by their identities.

(*Disturbing the Universe* 16)

Queer youth are constantly searching for answers to who they are and what they should be, through dialogues with institutions that are concerned with ethical, moral, and spiritual ideologies.

The social environment surrounding young adults is therefore responsible for affecting individual growth, whether positively or negatively, by creating situations that require personal confrontation with institutional ideology; in other words, “the social power that constructs them bestows upon them a power from which they generate their own sense of subjectivity” (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 7). By engaging in a dialectic relationship with institutional authority, the young adult is able to better locate his or her individuality than if simply left with nothing to fight against. In essence, the twenty-first-century young adult is in need of institutions and authorities to rebel against, “and indeed, adolescents do not achieve maturity [...] until they have reconciled themselves to the power entailed in

social institutions with which they must interact to survive” (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 20).

7.2 Conclusions from the Texts

The novels examined in this thesis speak to the complex and often frustrating, but ultimately beneficial, process of rebelling against hegemonic religious and cultural norms of sexuality and identity. Family, socio-political ideology, Christian institutions and dogma, and current events all play very influential roles in the lives of queer teens as they attempt to create personal identities in a rapidly changing world. The difficulty for most queer youth is the expectation of conforming to the heteronormative assumptions displayed so prominently in much of daily life, in family relationship dynamics, in Christian dogma, and in ideologies of advertising and pop culture such as film, television, and music. Many teens become frustrated because of the ways in which they differ from the hegemonic expectations surrounding them. *Nothing Pink*, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight* show this clearly within their narratives and in the process each protagonist undergoes to accept a queer (Christian) identity through the erasure of heteronormative and religious boundaries.

Family dynamics, being such an integral part of life as a young person, are an unavoidable part of personal identity formation in early years. Young queer Christians must come out of *the closet* built by family expectations, and Christian parents must also come out of the closet they have built to hide the shame of having a queer child. For queer young people, the often heteronormative dynamics of parental relationships can put an unintentional emphasis on heterosexuality as the ideal for intimate relationships. The emphasis of this dynamic in Christian dogma—which is, in these novels, perpetuated within the home by

parents—places yet another level of pressure on queer teens. These pressures and sometimes unintended expectations cause the teens in these three novels to rebel as what they feel is a part of themselves does not conform to the expectations of their families or Christian friends and pastors. The only options seem to be to reject the sexual identity in favor of the Christian identity or the other way around. What happens in these novels, however, is that the rebelling causes a much more exhaustive engagement with Christian dogma, scripture, and expectations that give Vincent, Paul, and Taylor the ability to reclaim Christianity as part of their identities. But they reclaim Christianity in a new and different way, erasing the boundaries of heteropatriarchal Christian expectations. The pressures of family and Christian dogma—both of which are intimate parts of the protagonists' growing up experience, and both of which are intrinsically linked to Sedgwick's exploration of *the closet*—are the catalyst for exploration, rebellion, and reclamation of Christianity for each character's own personal growth.

The road for each of the protagonists in the novels is far from smooth, however, and the novels speak to the reality of this rough journey as well, referring often to anti-gay social ideology. While *Nothing Pink* does not refer to an explicitly ex-gay ministry, the expectation for change is still powerful, coming from his parents, instead of an outside source, since his father is the pastor of the local church. The other two novels, however, are very explicit in their acknowledgement of real life ex-gay institutions. Paul does not actually attend one, but contacts a representative who displays a very tormented way of seeing the world after his attempted conversion to heterosexuality, and it scares Paul away from the idea. Taylor is actually sent off to an ex-gay ministry where he is expected to change his ways and become straight. But in all three cases, the protagonists fight back and rebel against the expectations

being forced on them, leading them to a place of understanding that they do indeed have the power to overcome dogma and doctrine to be themselves.

All of the main characters display their transgression and reclamation of Christianity through an interrogation of scripture—what Cheng (2011) refers to as talking about, and talking to God—and with specific dogma set forth by churches and Christian ministries within the texts. Each character confronts the “clobber passages” discussed earlier in the thesis. Vincent, by the end of *Nothing Pink*, looks beyond scripture to what he feels God is telling him, namely that he, Vincent, is perfect in God’s eyes just the way he is, and that he need not change for an institution that is not willing to accept him for who he was created to be. Paul, in *The God Box*, overcomes the desire to believe the scriptures he so often looked to as evidence of his sinful nature when he sees how they can be read differently and as he witnesses the use of scripture as a weapon wielded by his Christian friends against their peers. Seeing the Bible used to beat down ideas and personal opinions makes Paul realize that there are different scriptural interpretations, and this allows him to see that he does not need to be subjected to oppressive and limiting interpretations of the clobber passages. And Taylor, in *Thinking Straight*, through his friends at Straight to God, is able to reinterpret scripture in a way that gives him the freedom to see himself as “normal,” at least to himself and his friends. This reinterpretation of scripture gives Taylor ideas of how to show his parents and other intolerant Christian individuals that he is not abnormal or inherently sinful because of who he loves and is physically attracted to.

While all three of these novels are valuable sources of information and are mirrors for gay Christian teens to see themselves and to explore the dogma that can be so dominant in Christian families, there is still one more challenge for texts such as these to answer:

Heteronormative lenses. All three novels are successful pieces of literature when it comes to the queering and reclaiming of theology and doctrine, but this queering and reclamation still takes place within the confines of a relatively restrictive heteronormative framework. This is not to decrease or limit the value of these texts overall, but simply to point out the ways in which the texts are still conforming to a very heteronormative Christian worldview. Each of the texts has the main character take part in a monogamous coupling, much in the same way that heterosexual coupling takes place in other YA novels. Many of the assumptions within the texts also still conform to social assumptions of gender performance and expectations of masculinity that cause queer teens to still be seen by their peers as “other” and therefore as somewhat less valuable than their heterosexual counterparts.

Descriptive gendered statements and heterosexist assumptions still lie at the heart of these novels and, in some ways, trouble the queering of sexual assumptions by existing within the confines of a heteronormative frame. The body is still read as a social construction on which meaning is projected by others in a contemporary American, Protestant Christian context. Judith Butler speaks to the body as a passive site on which social meanings are projected:

‘The body’ appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But ‘the body’ is itself a construction, as are the myriad ‘bodies’ that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 12)

To break away from such a lens is considered by many to be extremely difficult if not impossible, and I have yet to personally read a novel that is successful in completely navigating away from any form of heterosexist assumptions or frameworks that involve assumptions of sexual orientation based on gendered performance or expectations. But what the novels do in terms of queering Christianity and dogma is important and is at least a starting point from which future novels can begin.

7.3 Areas for Further Research

This study focused on a very small section of YA literature that examined only gay male protagonists in Protestant Christian contexts. These protagonists also happened to be mainly middle-class and white, or in Paul's case, wanting to be white for much of the novel. This research considers a very limited sub-section in a very complex and problematic area of study, leaving a number of important topics untouched.

When I had to narrow down my choices for texts to focus on, I chose to leave out any novels that had queer female protagonists. My reasoning was that the addition of gender difference into this thesis would only cloud the observations I was attempting to make. Including female protagonists in this study would have required additional theoretical sources pertaining to gender difference, the ways in which Christianity treats males and females very differently in scripture, as well as the fact that scripture touches on lesbianism many times less than it does on male homosexuality, and many more aspects of gender construction and treatment within social and religious frameworks.

Of course any further discussion of gender difference would also lead to the related topic of transgender/transsexual teens. This is an almost entirely different field of research

and covers topics of extra-marginalization as trans teens are not only queer in terms of gender, but also in terms of how they express sexuality, which may or may not be heterosexual. Christian dogma surrounding the perfection of creation also leads to questions of how God could “make a mistake” by creating a person in the wrong physical body (i.e. a trans teen who believes he was born a girl in a boy’s body.) In many ways, the difficulties of gender parallel the difficulties of discussing sexuality within a Christian context. Many Christians would see the changing of one’s birth gender/sex as an abomination as it changes God’s perfect plan, or else that by changing physical attributes one is not treating his/her body as a temple as God directs in scripture.⁹

One of the difficult parts of narrowing down my novel selection was whether or not to include or exclude a multi-religious approach. In the end, as with the idea of gender, I had to decide to analyze only one religious group since each religious group has very different ideas of how to approach and treat queer sexuality. To examine Leanne Lieberman’s *Gravity*—a novel about a Jewish lesbian—alongside *Nothing Pink* would have been nearly impossible since both novels cover not only different eras, but different religious institutions, different genders, and different ways of expressing sexuality. The treatment of Mormonism in *Latter Days* is also different and creates a different dynamic altogether in terms of the rebellion aspect of the narrative since the protagonist has no way of reconciling his faith and sexuality. And while the Catholicism in *Seventy Times Seven* is not so very different from the Protestant Christian approach to homosexuality, at least within the novel, the protagonist

⁹ “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

is a priest who is supposed to be celibate, and is also beyond the teenage years, giving yet another dynamic to explore in terms of age.

While the approach I chose is limited and only covers a very small area of the whole theme of religion and queer sexuality, the overall exploration is no less important for the gay Christian male audience that the novels I chose are intended for. Every study must have defined parameters to avoid becoming too large and impossible to explore fully, and so this thesis was limited, but therefore more in-depth and thorough. The explorations contained here are important for the intended audience of the novels, and the framework I have provided can be applied to other texts in future research, whether that research be on trans youth in YA fiction with Christian themes, or whether it be on queer teens living within the confines and hegemonic dogma of other religious denominations.

7.4 Further Observations on Christianity and Homosexuality

One last issue I would like to discuss is the prominence of Christian themes that have begun to show up in the YA scene since the beginning of this project. Since I started exploring the topic of religion and homosexuality in 2008, there have been a number of books published and movies and documentaries produced that show the growing importance of exploring religion (Christianity most specifically) and queer sexuality. In the last year alone, three novels and a short story collection containing Christian and queer themes were published: Robin Reardon's *A Question of Manhood* (2010) and *The Evolution of Ethan Poe* (2011); Michael Griffo's *Unnatural* (2011); and Nancy Garden's "Worth Waiting For" in *Awake* (2011).

Since 2008, five documentaries were released that explore the queering of theology and the difficulties of growing up gay in Christian families and churches. The first of these was *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2008), in which a number of queer teens, their families, and religious leaders weigh in on their experiences growing up, identifying as queer, and trying to negotiate scripture and dogma to come to a place of reconciliation and acceptance. *Camp Out* (2008) explores the lives of a number of teens who attend a camp for queer Christian youth and how they feel being able to express themselves without fear of retaliation by non-accepting religious groups. In 2009, *Fish Out of Water* was released for the purpose of exploring the seven scriptural clobber passages used by many Christians to condemn the LGBT population. *Through My Eyes* (2009) was produced by the Gay Christian Network to give a voice to gay Christian teens and young adults as they share their experiences coming out to religiously conservative parents and Christian friends. Also released in 2009 was the documentary *We're All Angels*, chronicling the joys and struggles of the singing duo Jason and deMarco. They are not only a Christian singing duo, but are also a gay couple. The documentary explores their experiences within Christianity, with parents, with the conservative religious backlash, and their struggle to be together in a country that won't allow them to marry.

There are other movies that came out earlier and that are not necessarily documentaries, such as *Saved!* (2004) and *Prom Queen* (2005), but they still refer to specific instances of religious homophobia and the ex-gay movement. Many non-fiction sources have also been released in the last decade to give a different perspective on Christian doctrine and reactions to queer sexuality from conservative groups. And support groups have also been developed to help young people as they come out to family and friends navigate life as

queer and Christian: the Gay Christian Network, Soulforce, Gay Church, and Dignity USA. The explosion of resources and support groups over the last decade is evidence of a struggle that is not going to disappear, and it is also evidence that there is support for those young people who want to be themselves—gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc.—and who also want to be Christian and follow their hearts toward a better understanding of God and the Bible. *Nothing Pink*, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight* are part of this new and emerging canon, and as such, are invaluable resources for queer Christian teens seeking affirmation in an unstable and tumultuous society that does not always want to acknowledge or accept them.

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