

Representation of Queer People in Malinda Lo's Last Night at the Telegraph Club and Casey McQuiston's One Last Stop

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hrvatskog jezika i književnosti

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**Prikaz queer osoba u romanima *Prošle noći u Telegraf klubu* Malinde Lo i
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Mentor: prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2023.

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Full Professor

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Abstract

Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021) and Casey McQuiston's *One Last Stop* (2021) are young adult novels dealing, among other things, with the representation of queer people. Lo's novel depicts the discovery of the main character's sexuality and her coming out to strict Asian parents. McQuiston's novel follows the love story of the main character August and her girlfriend Jane. In both novels, the readers are acquainted with numerous characters who represent different queer identities. The aim of this paper is to showcase and explain the representation of queer characters in these two novels.

Keywords: *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, *One Last Stop*, queer, sexuality, identity, representation

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Introduction

Last Night at the Telegraph Club and *One Last Stop* are the novels whose main characters are queer people. The first novel *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* by Malinda Lo deals with the main character's discovery of sexuality and her struggles with coming out, which "is a term that refers to the disclosure of one's non-heterosexual orientation to others" (Guo 12). *One Last Stop* by Casey McQuiston focuses on the lives of queer people and points out that they have different qualities and that being queer does not define them.

This paper will deal with different queer representations in the afore-mentioned novels. Queer representation in media is important because it introduces queer people to non-queer people and allows younger queer people to see themselves being represented. "Representation is extremely important in this regard because it shows queer people being happy, allowing a queer reader to see themselves in the book, and imagine happiness for themselves" (Befeler 38).

1. Defining Queerness

The word “queer” “works as an umbrella term for a range of sexual and gender identities that are not ‘straight,’ or at least not normative” (Somerville 1). In today’s world, in which being heterosexual is the norm, some people fear things that are not typical, one of them being homosexuality or queerness. In his “Friendship as a Way of Life,” French philosopher Michael Foucault attempts to explain where this fear comes from:

homosexuality’s threat to the dominant order has far less to do with the sodomitical sex act than it does with the queerness of the forms of relationality which surround that act: “To imagine a sexual act that doesn’t conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another – there’s the problem.” This, he speculates, is why where heterosexuality is represented as a complex set of highly ritualized practices (romance, marriage, family, etc.), homosexuality is often reduced in representation to a single act (sodomy). (qtd. in Doyle 329-30)

Because heterosexuality is a social normative, queer people are often faced with discriminatory behaviour:

The human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) individuals are violated around the world. LGBTIQ people are attacked, kidnapped, raped, and murdered based on their real or perceived sexuality, gender identity, and/or expression. They face social, political, and economic exclusion and marginalization. In one third of the world’s countries, LGBTIQ people can be arrested and jailed, and in five countries they may be executed for engaging in same-sex relationships and acts (UN 2013). As of 2015, seventy-six countries around the world criminalize consensual same-sex relationships. (Mason 1)

For that reason, queer representation in media is crucial. With queer representation in media, people can be acquainted with various queer identities, which can result in those identities being normalized, and eventually accepted.

2. About *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*

Last Night at The Telegraph Club is a 2021 novel written by Malinda Lo. The novel is set in the 1950s and centres around Lily Hu, a seventeen year-old Chinese American high school student. Lily deals with the burdens of discovery and acceptance of her sexuality, which is very hard for her, but what is even harder for her is dealing with the disastrous reaction of her family and best friend Shirley. Alongside with dealing with her sexuality, Lily has to be the perfect daughter to her Chinese parents and do as they say. Lily also deals with being a Chinese American: she has to nourish Chinese traditions while trying to be a real American. Her friend Will Chang invites her to a picnic organized by his group Chinese American Democratic Youth League, or as the members call it Man Ts'ing. The group is suspected to be communist, communism being perceived as one of the biggest threats to American society at the time. Lily's father is a doctor and one of his patients is a member of that group, so the FBI interviews him and seeing Lily on the picnic made FBI's concern even bigger. As a result, the FBI takes Lily's father's green card, so he faces deportation. That is why Lily has to be a real American: "What we have to do is make sure we show we're a proper American family – because we are. That means you study hard and don't have to do anything with the Man Ts'ing" (Lo 70).

In addition to associating with Chinese American Democratic Youth League, Lily also calls into question her parents' wish for her to be a real American by going to the Telegraph Club. The Telegraph Club is a gay club. Gay clubs were at the time the only places where gay people could get together and be themselves in public but they were still in somewhat of a private area hidden from people who disapproved of them. The clubs often got raided by the police: "[t]hroughout the 1940s and 1950s the city saw waves of police crackdowns on queer public spaces with gay bars often as the main targets" (Smith 2).

Lily learns about the Telegraph Club from an ad about a male impersonator, who was performing there, in the newspaper. She goes there with her school friend Kathleen Miller. Lily likes the place and goes there with Kathleen a few times, she even meets a couple of girls there. Kathleen and Lily start spending more time together after school, which leads them to falling in love with each other. Unfortunately, one night the club gets raided, police catches Kathleen, and someone sees Lily going out of the club. For that reason, Lily confesses everything to her parents who are very disappointed and send her off to live with her aunt. The novel has, nevertheless, a happy ending – Lily and Kathleen meet up at a café and continue their romance.

Even though the novel is fictional, Lo notes that

Lily's story is my attempt to draw some of this history out from the margins, to un-erase the stories of women... Lily's story is entirely fiction and it is not based on theirs, but I imagine that she and these real women all had to deal with similar challenges: learning how to live as both Chinese American and lesbian, in spaces that often did not allow both to coexist. (407)

2.1. The Analysis of Lily Hu

The first time Lily questions her sexuality is when she sees the Tommy Andrews ad in the newspaper: it "was relatively large and included a photo of a person who looked like a handsome man with his hair slicked back, dressed in a tuxedo. Something went still inside Lily, as if her heart had taken a breath before it continued breathing" (Lo 16). She then rips the ad out of the newspaper and wants to put it up on her wall, but she does not dare risk someone seeing it there. Then she resorts to hiding it in a magazine where two more photographs were hidden— one of Katherine Hepburn and one of two Women Airforce Service Pilots. Lily remembers the time when she saw the photograph of Katherine Hepburn: she "had stopped at the photo and stared at it until her hair began to burn from the heat, and then- before she could second-guess herself- she ripped it out of the magazine" (Lo 22). The photograph of the two pilots made her feel different: they "weren't as dashing as Katherine Hepburn, but there was something compelling about their casual closeness" (Lo 23). Lily does not understand why she has been drawn to those pictures: she "could not put into words why she gathered these photos together, but she could feel it in her bones: a hot and restless urge to look- and, by looking, to know" (Lo 23). Deep down inside she knows why she was drawn to the pictures but she cannot bring herself to accepting it yet.

Another clue for comprehending Lily's sexuality can be found in her fascination with the book she found at a drug store – *Strange Season*. She picks up the book because the cover intrigues her: it "had two women on a cover, a blonde and a brunette. The blonde wore a pink negligee and knelt on the ground, eyes cast down demurely while the shapely brunette lurked behind her" (Lo 49). The book is about the two women on the cover, Maxine and Patrice, who are involved romantically. All that makes Lily confused as she

knew that what she has read in *Strange Season* was not only scandalous, it was perverse. She should feel dirty by reading it; she should feel guilty for being thrilled by it. The problem was, she didn't. She felt as if she had finally cracked the last part of the code she had been puzzling over for so long that she couldn't remember when she had started deciphering it. She felt exhilarated. (Lo 42)

Strange Season is a reference to lesbian pulps that were popular in the 1950s. Lesbian pulps could easily be found in drug stores and they were not frowned upon. The novels were important for the lesbian community because they had a chance to read a book which they were represented in. Yet, "the genre's undeniably homophobic and voyeuristic appeal to a heterosexual male audience intent on enjoying the 'queer loves' of the 'twilight woman' ties this image of lesbianism to heterosexual pornography" (Keller 385). Even though these novels were not exactly the representation lesbian women wanted, they were the only works in which two women could live their happily ever after. That is, however, not the case of *Strange Season* as the novel ends with Patrice in an insane asylum where she was brought because of her sexuality, which makes Lily mad.

The combination of her feelings towards Kathleen, the joy of seeing Tommy Andrews, and reading *Strange Season* make Lily accept her sexuality. She explains to Kath that deep down she has known it for a long time but just recently she has realized it herself. This is the important moment in Lily's coming out as self-awareness and self-acknowledgement play a big part in the process of accepting one's sexuality and can take a long time to occur. They are

the precursor to building self-tolerance and then self-acceptance of sexuality as a part of one's identity. Self-acceptance . . . is suggested to be achieved by resolving internal conflicts arising from identifying as LGBTQ+ within a heterosexist society, which further allows for progression in building positive feelings and pride toward the self (identity affirmation and pride), as well as successfully integrating and valuing one's sexuality as a part of one's identity (identity centrality). (Camp, Vitoratou, and Rimes 2354)

What makes it hard for Lily to accept her identity is the time she lives in – the 1950s when "homosexuality was a crime, sin, or illness; many homosexuals thought of themselves as 'flawed individuals' or people with 'a homosexual problem'" (Keller 386). Self-acceptance occurs when Lily stops thinking about other people's opinions, when she starts caring about her own feelings and happiness, when she realizes that she is happy with Kathleen, and when she feels free while socializing with women she meets at the Telegraph Club.

Another factor that makes Lily's self-acceptance harder is living in a traditional Chinese family. In the 1950s, every family would be horrified if their child came out as homosexual, but for Lily's family this has been even harder. Lily's father's green card has been taken away and they are trying to portray themselves as a real American family that cares about American values; having a lesbian daughter could only make this more complicated. In addition, Lily knows what her family expects from her: "A respectable girl was easily categorized, her motivations clear. She wanted a college degree, and then a husband, and then a nice home and adorable children, in that order" (Lo 30). Having a girlfriend or a wife does not have a place on that list.

Lily decides to come out to her mom after the Telegraph Club got raided because of an article in the newspaper about it. Her mom does not take it well, which is a common reaction as parents

initially felt shocked when they realized that their child was same-sex attracted, followed by denial of this information; subsequently, they started to feel guilty, not only because they believed it was their fault that their child identified as same-sex attracted, but also, because they felt some sort of guilt about having a same-sex attracted child. Subsequently, their sense of guilt turned into anger, followed by eventual acceptance. (Guo 49)

She even gives Lily a chance to cover it up: "We'll tell your father. He'll be able to help you. You won't tell your aunts and uncles about this. You won't say a word to your grandmother. Do you hear me? Everyone knows you're a good Chinese girl" (Lo 329). Lily is conflicted but she is determined in her decision that her sexual orientation is not a mistake:

It was clear if she agreed with her mother- and Shirley - if she would only tell them what they wanted to hear, then she could move forward on her prescribed path. But that would mean erasing all her trips to the Telegraph Club; it would mean denying her desire to go at all. It meant surprising her feelings for Kath, and at that moment, her feelings seemed inside her so painfully that she was terrified she might bust. (Lo 327)

Lily's mother goes through all the emotional stages except acceptance. She slaps Lily, yells at her, wonders who has Lily been influenced by because it is impossible for her to be a lesbian without someone else's impact. Lily's father is shocked but he takes the news better than his wife. He mentions to Lily that he once worked with a lesbian doctor:

I admired her skills as a physician. But everyone knew about her personal life, and she never married. There were rumors, of course, but she lived alone. I think she still lives alone. This is what your mother and I are worried about. We want you to marry and have children. You should have a full life, not a stunned one in which you wind up alone, with no one to care for you. (Lo 379-80)

It is often that parents worry about their children's future and how society will treat them when they come out as they worry "about social discrimination against their same-sex attracted child. Thus, in order to protect their child from being socially discriminated against and excluded by others, these parents continued to demand that their child change their sexuality" (Guo 232). The best thing her parents could think of doing is to send her away to live with her aunt Judy whom Lily loves and admires very much. That was supposed to keep Lily away from Kathleen, who is, according to Lily's parents, the one that talked Lily into going to the club and discovering she is a lesbian. Despite her family's intentions, Lily does not forget Kathleen and she does not become straight.

2.2. The Analysis of Kathleen Miller

Kathleen is Lily's love interest in the novel. She is also seventeen-years-old and goes to Lily's high school, they are acquaintances. The two were never friends because Kathleen is Caucasian and Lily was friends only with the Chinese kids. One day they get paired to do a group assignment and they feel an instant connection; they are also both in the same Math class and they both love Math. When Lily's best friends Shirley finds out the two have become close friends, she warns Lily: "Don't you remember what happened with Kathleen's friend, Jean Warnock? . . . Jean's queer. You don't remember? Somebody caught her in the band room last year... with another girl" (Lo 111).

The character of Kathleen represents a lesbian who is sure and confident in her sexuality, she has already accepted it. She is confident and comfortable when socializing with women they meet in the club but she is not quite comfortable with coming out to her family or school friends yet. In one of their club outings, one girl calls Kathleen a baby butch, which makes "Lily realize . . . she was trying to hide the fact that she was pleased. Rhonda had apparently paid Kath a compliment, and Lily felt an electric clutch in her belly as she recognized it, *butch* like a blue ribbon awarded at the country fair, *baby* like a promise" (Lo 198). In the lesbian world, women

are often divided into two categories: butch and femme. Butch lesbians are the one that appear and dress more masculine while femme lesbians highlight their feminine side with their appearance. In the novel, Kathleen can be seen as a representation of a butch lesbian whereas Lily can be regarded as a representation of a femme lesbian. It is very common for butches and femmes to be in a relationship with one another. In their relationships, “[t]he butch’s masculine appearance and the sharp gendered contrast between the two make their queerness highly legible” (Genter 604).

2.3. The Analysis of Tommy Andrews

Tommy Andrews is a male impersonator and her real name is Theresa Scafani. She works at the Telegraph Club. Lily is mesmerized by her, mostly by the fact that she acts and dresses like a man. Lily knows she is a woman and “[t]he knowledge that despite the clothes Tommy wore, despite the attitude that invited everyone in the room to gaze at her, she was not a man” (Lo 146) is very exciting to her. Tommy Andrews was then referred to as a male impersonator, nowadays she would be called a drag king: “early male impersonators . . . set the stage for contemporary drag kings traditionally understood to be female-bodied people performing masculinities” (Shapiro 251).

Moreover, Tommy also represents all the queer people who get hurt for being what they are. When the Telegraph Club gets raided, Tommy gets arrested and she spends a couple of days in prison. Her name appears in the newspaper article: “*Theresa Scafani who performs at the club as a male impersonator under the stage name Tommy Andrews. Both women were arrested and charged with contributing to the delinquency of minors, and Scafani was charged with lewd conduct*” (Lo 314). These charges cannot be further from the truth: while performing Tommy would pick a woman from the audience and serenade to her or she would flirt with women in the audience, which is not a crime mentioned in the newspaper.

3. About *One Last Stop*

One Last Stop is a 2021 novel written by Casey McQuiston. The main character of this novel is twenty-three-year-old August Landry who has just moved to New York. While looking for an apartment, she comes across a roommate wanted add taped to a trash can in a restaurant. She decides to visit the apartment where she meets her roommates. Niko is the first one she meets, he is a transgender man and a psychic. He lives there with his girlfriend Maya and there is another roommate Wes who is a gay man. They are next door neighbours with Isaiah who is a gay man and a drag queen, his drag name is Annie Depressant. August moves into the apartment and starts working at a pancake diner. Her life seems monotone but that quickly changes when she starts commuting by train where she meets Jane. She is instantly attracted to Jane and even tries to ask her out but Jane refuses and August thinks she is not interested. Yet, Jane is always there when August takes the train. Soon after, they realise that Jane is trapped in time and that she has been stuck on the train for forty-four years since 1977. Jane has very little memory of her life before getting stuck and she has a vague concept of time, so she is not quite aware of the fact that she has been stuck on the train for forty four years. In the meantime, August and Jane start dating. August and all of her roommates try to get Jane “unstuck” from the train, even though they are not sure of the outcome: Jane could get back to 1977, she could stay in the present time, but she could also die. Eventually, they take a risk and Jane stays in the present time.

In this novel, the emphasis is on August and Jane’s love story and helping Jane get out of the subway. Not on struggling with sexual and gender identity, which seems to be a common topic in queer YA novels: “[t]hough there are novels in YA Romance that highlight the experience of teens in love, like *Simon vs. the Homosapien Agenda* (2015) by Becky Albertalli, these often focus on the coming out experience to friends and family, rather than the pursuing of significant romantic relationships” (Befeler 34). All the individuals in this novel are certain about their sexuality and gender identity and that is not what defines them; their sexuality and gender identity is just a small part of who they are as a person. Also, they do not get the title of a token gay best friend, who is a side character, they are allowed to exist in their own story. The other characters

in *One Last Stop* serve as exceptional queer representation, allowed to exist without being sidekicks or part of a tragic narrative. Often in popular media, there is a token queer person in a cast of straight characters, especially in a high school setting, like Damian in the film *Mean Girls* (2004) and *Brandon in Easy A* (2010). The “gay best

friend” trope emerges when there is a female protagonist who needs a sassy sidekick with humorous one-liners, or the butt of a bully’s joke, whom the protagonist must react to in order to seem heroic. (Befeler 37)

3.1. The Analysis of Biyu, “Jane,” Su

Jane is the characters who has experienced living as a lesbian in the 1970s as well as living as a lesbian in today’s society. She observes how the times have changed: “I ride this train every day, and I see gay people just holding hands in public, in front of everyone, and most of the time, nobody fucks with them, and that’s... I don’t know if you realize how crazy that is to me. I know things aren’t perfect, but at least if I stayed, it’d be different” (McQuiston 317). Jane acknowledges that things today are not perfect but they are far better than before.

She is the representative of lesbians who fought for their rights, having the opportunity to experience the results of that fight, which was not possible for many members of the community in the past. Jane shares her problems with August: “There were people in the punk scene and the anti-war crowd who hated gays, and people in the lesbian crowd who hated Asians” (McQuiston 197). She struggled with the sense of belonging, she also did not feel accepted at home by her family so she ran away. She also shares how it was to live as a queer person: she “remembers fights in the streets, raids on bars, the police dragging her out in cuffs for wearing man’s jeans, spitting blood on the floor of a packed cell” (McQuiston 198). Jane’s recollections are historically accurate as gay men

most often risked police action when plainclothes officers, who had been sent to monitor bars undercover, witnessed men dancing together, kissing, touching, or "soliciting" sex. Places that catered to women endured mass arrests more often because lesbians – simply by being part of a subculture organized around forms of gender expression – were treated as violators of local and state laws. (Stewart-Winter 64)

The topic Jane also discusses is AIDS: “It was early- too early for anyone to have any idea what was happening- but she remembers friends getting sick, taking a guy from the floor above to the hospital in the back of a cab and being told she wasn’t allowed to see him, and later, watching his boyfriend get told the same thing” (McQuiston 198). The HIV was one of the worst things that happened to the LGBTQ community because it gave others the right to judge and hate them even more. In their minds, AIDS was a deserved punishment because only gay people got it,

heterosexual people were protected: “[c]onservatives have used AIDS to rehabilitate the notion of ‘the homosexual’ as a polluted figure. AIDS is read as revealing the essence of a promiscuous homosexual desire and proof of its dangerous and subversive nature” (Seidman 189).

Jane is the character who serves as a reminder of what the LGBTQ community has gone through to be where they are today. She is here to let everyone know that things get better and that happiness is worth fighting for.

3.2. The Analysis of August Landry, Niko Rivera, Isaiah, and Winfield

August Landry is the main character in *One Last Stop*. She is twenty-three-years old and she has never been in a relationship before meeting Jane, which fits the genre the novel belongs to: “[n]ew Adult Romance is a fitting genre category for queer adults because of this likelihood to have a first significant relationship after high school” (Befeler 34). The only time when she mentions her sexuality is when she admires Niko for always being sure of his gender identity: “August thinks distantly about her gradual stumble into knowledge she was bisexual, the years of confusing crushes she tried to rationalize away. She can’t imagine always knowing something huge about herself and never questioning it” (McQuiston 185-86). The character of August represents insecure queer people in their early twenties and serves as an example that it is okay and not shameful not to have been in a relationship before. In the novel, she is still looking for her place under the sun both career-wise and in regards to her love life.

Niko Rivera is one of August’s roommates and he is a transgender man: he was born as a woman but felt like a man so he transitioned into a man. Niko claims to have always known that he is boy: “Yeah, I knew I was a boy and I knew my sister was a girl...” (McQuiston 186). In the novel, Niko’s transgenerness is not his main trait; for the storyline it is more important that he is a psychic. Niko’s family accepts him from the start, which is not very common especially because they are Catholic: “The whole psychic thing - my mom always called it a gift from God. So they believed me about being a boy. Our church wasn’t so chill about it when I wanted to transition though” (McQuiston 186). Niko’s character represents transgender people and serves as an example that being transgender is just part of one’s identity.

Isaiah is their next door neighbour, he is a gay man but also a drag queen. “Drag queens, in contrast, are gay men who dress and perform as but do not want to be women or have women’s bodies” (Taylor and Rupp 115). Isaiah’s drag name is Annie Depressant. In the novel, the reader

gets acquainted with more drag queens including Winfield who works with August at the pancake shop. Yet, Winfield does not look like someone who is a drag queen, he even has a girlfriend, and he sees himself as pansexual: “What, you have never met a bearded pansexual drag queen?” (McQuiston 180). Pansexual people are those who feel “sexual or romantic attraction to people regardless of their gender expression (masculinity or femininity), gender identity, or biological sex” (Blaszczynski, Dar-Nimrod, and Morandini 1). In one of her stories, Jane discovers how times were tough even for drag queens and that queens would go hungry for weeks just to afford their gowns. Isaiah’s and Winfield’s characters show how drags have come a long way and how one can be anything they set their mind to, even a bearded drag queen with a girlfriend.

3.3. The Analysis of Augie Landry

Augie or August Landry was August’s uncle, her mother named her after him. Augie had a very close relationship with August’s mother but he ran away from home when she was a little girl. Her whole life August’s mother tried to find Augie because he went missing in 1973. Her mother did not know why Augie ran away from home but he never got along with their parents and she assumed he got a girl pregnant or got in trouble with the police. That was not true, Augie lived in New York with Jane, he was a gay man and that is why he ran away from home and that is why his parents did not accept him.

At first, Jane thought that August died in a horrible fire in a bar he worked at. Twenty-three men died in that bar fire and she was sure that Augie was one of them: “There are a couple of unmarked graves... It wasn’t uncommon for there to be people like her or Augie, queer people who ran away and didn’t have families who could or would claim them...” (McQuiston 288). No one tried to investigate why the fire happened, it was a gay bar so no one cared that much, after it happened no one spoke of it. Luckily, Augie did not go to work that day even though he was supposed to. He ran away from New York because he could not deal with losing that many friends at once. Augie did die in a car accident in 1977, but he died happy. He spent his last years living with his partner in California. He wanted Jane to come and live with him and he was hoping to get in touch with his sister. At last, Augie did not die in a horrible fire but he died living the life of his dreams.

Conclusion

Last Night at the Telegraph Club and *One Last Stop* are two vastly different novels but they do have one thing in common: they centre around queer characters. In *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, the emphasis is on queer struggles in the 1950s and discovering and exploring one's sexuality. The protagonist Lily Hu comes to realization that she is a lesbian and she slowly learns how to navigate her life knowing that fact. She is forced to live a double life and hide her sexuality from her parents and when they eventually find out, they are not happy and send her to live with her aunt. This novel centres around the lesbian community and its problems. Lily is new to the community and she needs someone to introduce her to other people in the community and that someone is Kathleen Miller. Kathleen is aware of her identity but she has not come out to her family yet. In the club, they meet other lesbians who are not closeted. In the club, they also meet Tommy Andrews, a male impersonator. *One Last Stop* is a novel whose emphasis is not on discovering one's sexuality but on finding a way to get Jane out of the train. Almost all the character in this novel are a part of the LGBTQ community but that is not what defines them, it is just a small part of who they are as persons. This novel allows queer people to exist beyond their gender and sexual identity, which is not always the case in today's media.

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