

# Contemporary Czech LGBT+ literature: The example of Muffin and Tea and Cupcakes and Conspirators

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## Abstract

Based on a qualitative content analysis, we present two loosely related artistic narratives, *Muffin and Tea* (2018) and *Cupcakes and Conspirators* (2019) by Theo Addair, which belong to the current stream of contemporary young adult literature in which homosexuality is thematized. We have focused on selected narrative lines that relate to the themes of literary representations of homosexuality in contemporary intentional literature. Before the analysis, we set four questions: 1. How is the theme of homosexuality presented in these two works; 2. What is the originality of these artistic narratives; 3. How does the author portray the main characters in relation to their perception of themselves; 4. Are these works relevant to the issue of self-acceptance and acceptance by contemporary society in the area of minority sexual orientation? We conclude that sexual minority issues are depicted in these narratives in conjunction with the adolescents' societal backgrounds, with the main theme presented alongside other minority characteristics or handicaps that affect the adolescents' self-acceptance. It is in the accentuation of I other themes that we see the relevance of the publications for contemporary adolescent readers.

**Keywords:** Muffin and Tea, Cupcakes and Conspirators, homosexuality, young adult literature, current topics, qualitative content analysis

## 1. Introduction

In this paper we discuss two publications in the field of contemporary young adult gay prose, *Muffin and Tea* (2018) and *Cupcakes and Conspirators* (2019). Our selection of these works is guided primarily by the relatively strong response to these fictional narratives among teen readers, as well as our desire to anchor these works within the broader context of intentional (i.e. for children and youth) gay-themed literature. Intentional gay-themed literature can be anchored within various contexts, including the exploration of LGBTQ+ relationships and identities in different settings, can resonate with the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in expressing their feelings authentically. Additionally, the presence of homophobia and discrimination in educational settings, as highlighted in a study by Curwood et al. (Thomas, 1992), underscores the importance of intentional gay-themed literature in addressing societal prejudices and advocating for inclusivity. Furthermore, the evolution of pathways to parenthood for gay men.

In this paper we try to answer the following questions: 1. How is the topic of homosexuality presented in these two works; 2. What is the originality of these artistic narratives; 3. How does the author portray the main characters in relation to their perception of themselves; and 4. Are these works topical with regard to the issue of self-acceptance and acceptance by contemporary society in the area of minority sexual orientation?

These questions were chosen because the representation of homosexual themes in contemporary literature for children and young people has been the subject of increasing interest and debate in recent years. Scholars have explored various aspects of this topic, examining how LGBTQ+ characters and same-sex families are portrayed in children's media (Yadav & Kalia, 2022). From analyzing the history of homosexuality in children's literature to examining the impact of queer literature on young readers' subjectivities in school settings, researchers have highlighted the importance of a sensitive and inclusive approach to LGBTQ+ topics (Amaral & Ribeiro, 2018).

The paper is oriented as an essayistic reflection with an emphasis on answering the postulated questions. It is quite deliberate not to describe the plot of the novels in detail, so as not to possibly give away the plot. We are convinced that the chosen approach is adequate to answer the postulated questions and to portray the current direction of contemporary young adult literature with homosexual themes.

## 2. Method

The narrative was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. According to Kerling (1972, p. 528 in Klapko 2013, p. 140), this method can be used "to determine the relative dominance or frequency of various communicative phenomena, propaganda, tendencies, styles, changes in content and readability". The goals of quantitative content analysis include understanding utterances in context and in process development, in addition to. We focused on changes in the views of the speakers and the author in terms of communication with the reader. We work within the guidelines of a narrow contextual analysis, which means that we work only with

the fictional narrative under study or with other works of fiction to support our claims. Through the process of analysis described above, we attempt to answer the above questions.

Narrative passages (themes, motives, author's intention, etc.) were excerpted from the analyzed publications, which seemed to be adequate for answering the postulated questions.

### *2.1 Anchoring the research questions*

To postulate the first question: 1. How is the theme of homosexuality presented in these two works, we are guided mainly by the desire to examine the literary treatment of the topic in contemporary Czech young adult literature with an emphasis on the problems accompanying coming out, self-acceptance or acceptance of the majority society's ostracism (not just sexual). At the same time, we will notice the author's practices in relation to the construction of the story, its twists and turns and gradations. Basic interpretive tools will be used to answer this question.

To introduce the second question, we are guided by our desire to determine whether the works analyzed are original, in the context of the significant degree of popularity and acceptance of these works among its Czech implicit readers. We perceive originality in the context of narrative analysis as the implementation of new techniques for plotting a story or a different conception of the main theme.

For the postulation of the third question, we are guided by the fact that the heroes come from different family backgrounds in which different axiological and ethical values are emphasized. It is the social background from which the two main characters come that greatly influences their self-perception, the construction of their own personality and, to some extent, their different settings of moral and other values.

In relation to the fourth question, we will try to answer whether the way of presenting the theme of homosexuality in the analyzed publications corresponds to the contemporary needs of the implicit readers of these artistic narratives, whether they can find in them answers to the questions they may ask themselves in relation to their identity or in relation to the society in which they live, which surrounds them and which influences their personalities.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### *3.1 Presentation of novels*

The story is about two 16-year-old boys from different backgrounds who attend the same grammar school after primary school (Daniel is one-year higher than Kit). In *Muffin and Tea*, the author explicates the boys' meeting at boarding school, the establishment of their close relationship and the peripeteia that lead to the establishment of a love affair between them. The second volume, *Cupcakes and Conspirators*, describes their closer relationship and how their families affect the possibility of realizing their relationship *sensu stricto* (living together, etc.).

### *3.2 How is the theme of homosexuality presented in these two works?*

Homosexuality is portrayed in both works as something that teenagers (in this case 16-year-old boys) must hide, and as a minority sexual orientation that is a source of bullying by the majority society. Homosexuality is portrayed as an intimate secret that is not to be revealed and whose disclosure can lead to social as well as family problems.

Daniel, coming from a materially oriented Prague family, experienced his coming out inadvertently, by having his first lover send a sexual photograph to his father. Since then, Daniel began to build an impenetrable play around himself, limiting his contacts with others to only the most necessary situations and not discussing his private life with anyone. Coming out further disrupted his fragile relationship with his father, who is portrayed in the story as a member of the white heterosexual majority with zero tolerance for any, let alone sexual, differences. The father's attempts to cure Daniel, coupled with zero listening to his needs, interests or motivations, leads to him trying to set him up with a female student who is doing her mandatory internship at his law firm (the paradoxical nature of this situation is underscored by Daniel's father ostentatiously handing him a packet of condoms with a lecture on safe sex). All this is underlined by Daniel's absurdly submissive mother, who tolerates her father's outbursts of anger towards Daniel, which culminate in his physical assault by his father.

Kit comes from an incomplete family and lives only with his mother. Kit grows up in a family of Spanish immigrants; Kit's mother is very tolerant of various forms of minorities, especially because of her background, and she wants her son to be happy in life, despite Kit's very precarious financial background.

Homosexuality is thus not only portrayed as a minority sexual orientation, the acceptance of which depends on the social background of the family, its values, or mutual relations within it, but is also presented in connection with other family aspects: an incomplete family, an intolerant aggressive parent or in correspondence with the degree of acceptance of homosexuality in relation to the values of the parents. Other forms of handicaps are also thematized, in the case of Kit, the issue of immigrants and his mother's financial problems; in relation to Daniel, we can mention a mild form of autism, which he suffers from and which he developed in relation to his father's inadequate expectations, his parent's psychological and physical abuse, or in correspondence with his inability to behave and act freely.

It is on the clash of these two worlds that the story of both novels is built. The boys interact with each other, through debates they break down their preconceptions that they bring with them from their family and discover their own positive and negative sides. All of this is of course overlaid with getting to know each other on a relational level and with the issue of exposing their relationship to their classmates.

### *3.3 What is the originality of these artistic narratives?*

The analyzed artistic narratives are original in that they thematize not only homosexuality and its discovery by adolescent boys, but also the thematization of other so-called topical

themes (by these we mean themes that oscillate in contemporary society, and which have been somewhat tabooed in intentional and young adult literature until recently). Thaller (2015) states, for example mental illness, Roy (2022) adds sex and sexuality education. All these topics, plus, for example, bullying in the school environment, are strongly thermalized in these publications. Also original is the chosen method of telling the story: the same situation is viewed in separate chapters from Daniel and Kit's point of view, which the author uses to give a thorough psychological portrayal of the characters and to describe the development of their axiological value system and its transformation, due to the mutual influence of the two boys.

The literary treatment of self-discovery in a minority secular orientation is not original: the method of treatment is like other, especially American, young adult works with LGBT+ themes. As we have already outlined, we see originality precisely in the author's emphasis and treatment of the subject matter, considering the development of the basic functions of fiction, i.e., the author aims to shape the reader on an aesthetic and formative level and, finally, tries to make the recipients critically evaluate the story and its aspects. The novels do not include a strict statement about the bad or good behavior of the boys or their families, nor a definitive condemnation of xenophobic, stigmatizing, and other manifestations of intolerance, which in the story culminate in an open form of bullying of Daniel.

The work in question can therefore also be seen as a warning against various forms of intolerance and can be applied to the full range of issues it touches upon. The primary focus is, of course, on minority homosexual orientation, but other minorities, ethnic or otherwise, are also part of the stories.

### *3.4 How does the author portray the main characters in relation to their perception of themselves?*

We have already partially outlined the answer to this question in our answer to the first question. Daniel and Kit's self-acceptance depends mainly on the degree of understanding of their needs within the family. Daniel must fulfil his father's wishes, he must fulfil his ideas of a successful father, and Daniel's own life is entirely in the hands of someone else. This is the source of his complicated acceptance of his homosexuality and the source of his block to physical intimacy with another person. Kit's mother does everything in her power to make her son happy. She takes him as he is, with all his faults and strengths. She is supportive of him in his relationships with other boys, only afraid that he might be disappointed, unhappy, or let down by Daniel.

### *3.5 Are these works relevant to the issue of self-acceptance and acceptance by contemporary society in minority sexual orientation?*

Both *Muffin and Tea* and *Cupcakes and Conspirators* are, in our opinion, actual for today's teen readers. If we consider that contemporary society is mostly tolerant of sexual minorities, then the relevance of the work in relation to teenage readers can be seen more in terms of acknowledging one's difference from oneself. This step is the first step towards acceptance of

the homosexual by those closest to him and by the wider society in which he moves. The given theme is accentuated in the pre-synthesized art narratives by the fact that Kit has no major problems with the social group in which he moves, whereas Daniel, hiding his true self, is the target of ridicule and scorn because of his closeness. Everything changes in the context of long debates between the boys, which sometimes reach philosophical proportions.

Of course, topicality can also be found in other themes that are presented in opposing pairs. Daniel coming from a wealthy family not respecting him as a distinct personality, an introvert suffering from a mild form of autism with clearly externally set life goals that clash with his internal desires. In contrast, Kit, who grows up in a poor, incomplete family, but is fully respected by his immediate and distant environment, an extrovert seeking his place in life and in the world with the goal of making a living as a visual artist, while this internal goal is not interfered with by the ideas and desires of his family, on the contrary, he is fully supported in fulfilling his wishes.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article we presented two loosely related artistic narratives, *Muffin and Tea* and *Cupcakes and Conspirators* by Theo Addair. These are contemporary Czech narratives that focus on homosexuality and its related aspects, particularly the portrayal of the influence of the family and its expectations on the degree and manner of self-acceptance of adolescents. Through a qualitative content analysis, we tried to answer the predefined questions. In answering the first of these - How is the theme of homosexuality presented in these two works? - we concluded that homosexuality is primarily portrayed as a minority sexual orientation, whose acceptance by the environment depends to a large extent on the attitude of the family from which the adolescent comes, on the family's setting of axiological, moral and other values, and also on the degree of freedom that the parents allow the adolescent.

To the second question - What is the originality of these artistic narratives? - we answer that Addair has incorporated various issues into the story, not only the issue of sexual orientation. The themes of the so-called current issues (incomplete family, ethnic minorities, etc.) are portrayed in interaction with homosexuality, and Addair places equal emphasis on all these themes. Another aspect of originality is viewing the same scenes through the prism of Daniel and Kit. This chosen approach allows the readers the space (the principle of non-determinism) to internalize the meaning of the story, to ask different questions and to look for answers in the story, but also in their life.

In answering the third question - How does the author portray the main characters in relation to their perception of themselves? - we concluded that both Daniel and Kit, through their discussions with each other, shed the preconceptions from different areas that they brought from their families and thus gradually find themselves in their entirety. Addair uses contradictions to do this, which are related to both the external circumstances of self-acceptance and the internal ones. In doing so, he opens a wide range of possibilities for identifying or defining oneself in relation to the so-called referential heroes.

The last question was Are these works relevant to the issue of self-acceptance and acceptance by contemporary society in the area of minority sexual orientation? Our analysis concluded that the artistic narratives presented are very relevant to contemporary adolescents, especially in their un-simplified presentation of the problematics of homosexuality, their ambiguous solutions, their emphasis on different starting points, or their viewing of minority sexual orientation in a broader context that undoubtedly affects acceptance and self-acceptance as a self-aware, self-confident, unique, fulfilling, and happiness-deserving person.

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