

Radical Acceptance: Queer Alternatives to the Exceptional Outsider Story
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The exceptional outsider story in children's and young adult literature is a common pattern where the reader is invited to identify with an outsider protagonist who is bullied and rejected by their community until they prove their worth and gain acceptance. The ugly duckling, for example, is teased and rejected by the other ducks until growing up to be a beautiful swan. What is odd about this story is that the ducks are not shown to be wrong for bullying the ugly duckling while he is still ugly. And he gains their acceptance and admiration only after he proves himself to be the most beautiful creature on the pond. The message is not that we should accept others who are different from ourselves or who are somehow "ugly." The message is not that those of us who are different or "ugly" are worthy of love and acceptance exactly as we are. Harry Potter, alone in the world and despised by his aunt and uncle, proves himself to be the savior of the world. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was mocked by the other reindeer and rejected by Santa because of his red nose until it turned out that he could guide the sleigh in bad weather. Tacky the Penguin is rejected by his community until his loud singing proves useful for driving away hunters who want to capture the other penguins. This paper argues that this pattern of outsider story has the effect of reinforcing social norms even though the reader is invited to identify with the feelings of rejection experienced by the protagonist. These stories function as revenge fantasies, where feelings of rejection are dealt with by becoming *better* than everyone else. As such, they encourage conformity and do not teach readers how to grapple with differences. This paper theorizes the ethics of acceptance while presenting some queer alternatives to the exceptional outsider story—including David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*, Cory Silverberg and Fiona Smyth's *Sex is a Funny Word*, and the film *Lars and the Real Girl*—in order to suggest ways of revising this problematic narrative pattern for young readers.

Keywords: Queer, Trans, Race, Ethics of Difference, Exceptional Outsider