

In Romance, LOVE Always Wins

WHEN THE U.S. SUPREME COURT announced on June 26 that they'd ruled in favor of legalizing gay marriage in all 50 states, the world viewed it, to a degree, as 100 percent acceptance of gay love. But as most LGBTQ+ citizens — and their allies — can tell you, that's sadly not the case. Where love really wins, where there is a quickly growing acceptance of the fact that love is love no matter the sexual orientation or gender of the lovers, is in romance novels.

"Romance is romance and love is love," says Rachel Haimowitz, a founder of Riptide Publishing. "At the core of it, a queer romance follows all the same rules as a straight romance: The characters meet, there's a growing attraction, there's a core conflict that causes some bumps in the road, there's the climactic solution and there's a happy ending."

While queer romance has been around, in some form, for decades — from the gay pulp market of the mid 20th century, to the pre-internet slash fan fiction of the '70s, to the founding of Cleis Press in the '80s and other smaller queer publishers like Circlet Press and Bold Strokes Books in the '90s and aughts — it has only recently gained more visibility, bringing queer romance to an audience of readers who don't all identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Riptide is known for representing "the full rainbow spectrum" of characters, from gay, straight and bisexual to asexual, gender queer and transgender, as well as characters from all walks of life and all nationalities. And, Haimowitz says, that isn't by accident.

"We saw a gap in the market — and, crucially, one that further marginalized an already marginalized population — realized we had the experience and the passion to fill that gap, and have never looked back since," she says.

Filling that gap has served them well. By focusing on characters and stories that haven't always been widely read, they've been able to carve out a niche for themselves where, with an eye toward quality work, they've been able to attract not only LGBTQ+ readers, but straight readers as well. "I think readers, no matter their gender or sexual orientation, are drawn to compelling stories and characters they can relate to," says Sarah Frantz Lyons, Riptide's editorial director. "But that doesn't exclude

RENOWNED QUEER PUBLISHER **RIPTIDE** CELEBRATES ITS FOURTH ANNIVERSARY

By Jennifer Peters

heterosexual cisgendered readers from enjoying LGBTQ+ romances because they're good stories."

One of the ways that readers are being drawn in to these exceptional stories is through authors they already know. Romance favorites like Megan Mulry, Lori Witt and Charlotte Stein, all bestsellers, have been penning non-traditional love stories for Riptide since its launch, and they've brought some of their readers with them.

"I've had some fabulous reactions from (previously) non-LGBTQ+ readers," Mulry says. "Some people I thought would be skeptical and/or critical — such as a 93-year-old fan who loves my mainstream royal romances — turned out to be delighted with these books, and she never would've picked them up if she hadn't followed me as an author. That's the best-case scenario!"

In addition to being able to find authors they love writing queer romance, some readers may also find something deeper in queer romance that they can appreciate, even if they don't identify as queer themselves.

"I've spoken to a lot of readers who started out reading straight romances, then went to male/male and refuse to go back," Witt says. "I honestly believe that, at least for some of those readers, it's because they can finally read romances where the characters are truly equal, or at least have a shot at being equal. It's a breath of fresh air from the inherent misogyny in heterosexual romances — which, to be clear, is a reflection of our culture, not a result of the authors being misogynists."

Not only does LGBTQ+ romance offer a fresh perspective on equality, but it allows writers to liven up the romance genre with new takes on old ideas. "Queer romance offers fresh takes on a lot of stale tropes," Haimowitz says. "Many traditional assumptions and tropes, for instance with regard to male/female gender roles, are out the window and re-explored."

Author Anne Tenino sees the main difference between straight and gay romance as the ability of gay romance to do away completely with a lot of the gender stereotypes. "Take, for example, *The Slut*: In many straight romances, if the female character has a sexually questionable past, it's an issue that must be dealt with in the book,"

she says. “In gay romance, if one or both of the characters is or was slutty, it’s backstory, e.g. ‘Ryan has blue eyes, pale skin, dark hair, a very impressive and varied sexual history, and his grandfather is his only surviving relative. They’re very close.’”

It’s important to note that LGBTQ+ romance — and queer fiction in general — is still wildly underrepresented in the greater publishing universe. Haimowitz explains that most of the books in this particular sub-genre are considered runaway successes if they can move more than 10,000 copies. Even sales of a few thousand are incredibly notable. Which is, in part, why the bigger publishers aren’t focusing more on queer romance. But the times they are a-changin’. Earlier this year, Riptide author Amy Lane’s male/male romance, *The Bells of Times Square* (2014), was nominated for a RITA for Short Historical Romance, one of the first such nominations for a queer romance. Publishing authorities like Publisher’s Weekly and Library Journal have reviewed Riptide’s offerings, and have even presented some of the titles with starred reviews. More and more authors are breaking into the sub-genre and opening it up to a greater number of readers.

The fact that romance in general has been having a cultural moment helps, too. National Public Radio named this past summer the “Summer of Romance,” with popular radio programs and podcasts seeking to legitimize the bestselling genre and frequent bearer of elitist book scorn. BuzzFeed, too, has gotten on-board the romance bandwagon, offering coverage of the 2015 RT Booklovers Convention in Dallas and all the authors and titles represented there. And there’s a great hope in the queer romance community that all this pro-romance sentiment will help LGBTQ+ romance move further into the mainstream. “I think in general, a rising tide lifts all boats,” says author Alexis Hall. “I think with a situation like this, you’re always going to be relying on trickle-down. The hope, though, is that new readers attracted to romance in general will drift across or branch out into LGBTQ+ romance.

“I think a wider problem facing LGBTQ+ genre fiction is that it only gets mainstream critical attention as LGBTQ+ fiction, rather than being integrated into the genre to which it belongs,” Hall continues. “So, if someone publishes a list of the top 20 fantasy novels, it’d be very unlikely that they would include queer protagonists. And, sadly, the same is true for romance.”

For Riptide, where the focus is always on the quality of the story and the writing, and the particulars of the characters’ gender and sexual identities being secondary, this distinction is important. The changing LGBTQ+ landscape also plays a role in what Riptide hopes to see happen in its next four years.

“LGBTQ+ children are growing up today with the knowledge of who they are and without the social stigma of earlier generations,” says Amelia Vaughn, Riptide’s marketing coordinator. “Their stories will be very different than the ones who came before them.”

The ideal, of course, would be for queer fiction to lose its label all together, and the team behind Riptide is hopeful that, by “leading from the front” they can help move the dial in that direction. “We look forward to an age where queer fiction is no longer ‘queer’ fiction but rather just fiction,” Haimowitz says, “and where every house, big and small, has such titles on their list.” ✧

For more information on Riptide’s LGBTQ+ romances, check out RiptidePublishing.com.

TITLES TO TRY

WHETHER YOU’RE LOOKING for a gateway gay romance to help you ease into the genre or are a long-time reader looking for your next favorite book, Riptide has LGBTQ+ romances that will please every palate. To give you a proper introduction to the full rainbow of romantic reads, we suggest checking out these five fiercely romantic books.



➡ **GLITTERLAND** by Alexis Hall

Lovers of meaty contemporary romance will fall in love with this male/male story. The tale centers on depressed author Ash and his growing relationship with party-boy Darian. After the two meet in a club, they find that opposites really do attract. But has

Ash fallen too far down into depression to see that happiness is possible?



➡ **BOUND WITH LOVE** by Megyn Mulry

A female/female Regency romance, Mulry’s latest in the Regency Reimagined series stars Lady Vanessa and her long-time partner Nora, who’ve raised a family together for many years. But when Nora discovers a child she lost 20 years earlier

is, in fact, alive and well, their family and relationship are put to the test.



➡ **LEAD ME NOT** by Ann Gallagher (AKA Lori Witt)

Gallagher’s male/male inspirational romance features Isaac, a preacher who’s spent his life fighting against the sin of homosexuality — until he meets bartender Colton. As the pair grow closer, Isaac must

re-examine what it means for him to develop feelings for another man, and what his new identity means for his life of faith.



➡ **WEDDING FAVORS** by Anne Tenino

Lyons calls this one “special, smart and fun,” and readers are sure to agree. Tenino’s tale centers on Lucas and his first love — and first heartbreak — Gabe. When these two are thrown together as man of honor and best man, respectively, at a

friend’s wedding, sparks are sure to fly once more!



➡ **BLUE STEEL CHAIN** by Alex Beecroft

This one is a rarity in romance: a love story featuring an asexual lead. When James meets Aidan, he quickly falls in love. But while Aidan can play the part of the doting boyfriend, the truth is that he doesn’t feel any sexual attraction at all — maybe to

anyone. Can these two find a way to love each other?