

“Nothing has changed from last year, except the size of the Neanderthals”: Examining LGBTQ
YA and Middle Grade Discourses of Bigotry

Since the election of Donald Trump, LGBTQ populations have faced threats of their already limited rights being rolled back—during his confirmation hearing, Supreme Court Justice Kavanaugh refused to give opinions about *Obergefell v. Hodges* and *Masterpiece Cakeshop*, two landmark LGBTQ supreme court cases (Scott); Vice President Pence became the first in his office to speak at the conference of the notoriously anti-LGBTQ Family Research Council (Fitzsimons); and hate crimes against LGBTQ persons have risen since the 2016 election (Tillery). During these events, citizens and commentators alike have reacted to Trump’s administration stating that it “is not normal” (D’Antonio), “not America” (Nelles), or more generally, not who or what America is. Rather than engaging with the ideas behind these policy changes and events, critics work to separate them from the vision of America they see as correct.

This paper will interact with these ideas by looking at how LGBTQ young adult and middle grade fiction discuss homophobia and bigotry. Specifically, the ways in which characters distance themselves from their bullies by referring to them as “Neanderthals,” “troglodytes,” or coming from “caves.” I will briefly deconstruct this usage in novels that all pre-date Trump’s election in order to showcase how this language dismisses, rather than allowing for complex understanding or dialogue. The majority of these texts (such as Nelson’s 2014 *I’ll Give You the Sun*) use these terms in passing, leaving the insults to quietly become part of the reader’s lexicon. One, however, *Lily and Dunkin* (Gephart, 2016) stands out not only for being the only middle grade novel in my study, but also because it discusses how the “Neanderthals” come to be who they are.

Through this analysis, I aim to understand of how these novels are an example of how the political right and left are growing further apart in the United States.