

Is Queer Literature on the Rise? A Look at the Publishing Industry in 2025

By Milo Sanders

From Sappho's poetry in ancient Greece to Oscar Wilde's witty plays in the twentieth century to all the times and spaces in between, queer literature has always existed. But it hasn't always been as easy to find and widely published as it is in 2025. And when I say "easy to find," I don't really mean that either—it's not nearly as accessible as it deserves to be. In 2023, almost half the books on the banned book list were written or about LGBTQ people. In 2025, 25% of book bans were related to LGBTQ+ topics. In addition, traditional publishers rarely take a chance on queer literature, choosing instead to promote "safer" authors who are white, straight, and cis. What's holding the publishing industry back? How can we get more queer literature into the hands of readers? I talked to some publishing industry professionals and did some research to understand the nuances of the situation.

What is queer literature? In most definitions, it means a piece of work, whether poetry, non-fiction, or novel, that is written about the queer experience. In fiction works, it most often means that at least one of the main characters identifies as LGBTQ+. Usually this means that the author also identifies as queer, but that's something readers can't always confirm, nor is it up to them to call out authors who don't identify as queer. Some authors are loudly and proudly LGBTQ, but some don't feel safe to do so or feel like they need to come out in order to write queer literature. Some authors write queer characters because they are allies and have done sensitivity readings in order for their characters to feel authentic. But despite how the authors identify, queer literature speaks to the experience of queer people.

In the past, queer readers often felt they had to settle for just one or two secondary characters with whom they could identify, and often follow the trope of being the first token minority character to die. In recent years, however, the publishing scene has opened up more opportunities for queer main characters to thrive and be visible. The progress has been slow, but with multiple avenues of publishing available to authors, queer readers are finally seeing themselves represented more and more authentically in books everywhere.

Independent publishers have led the way for creating spaces for LGBTQ+ authors. From zines in one person's garage to presses with million-dollar budgets to every size in between, independent publishers often choose to highlight queer authors. Independent presses can pick and choose who they publish with much more "freedom," often because of the fact that they have less money to spend, and therefore less money to lose. A lot of independent

presses have the explicit mission to focus on queer, minority, or oppressed authors. Examples of this are [Row House Publishing](#), [Feminist Press](#), [Midnight Meadow](#), [Lethe Press](#), and [Arsenal Pulp Press](#), to name just a very few. Some presses, like Feminist Press, have been operating for decades and now have a larger budget. Others, like Midnight Meadow and Row House Publishing, are only a few years old and survive on donations, volunteers, and side-gigs. But they all have the same goal: the publish authors that might not get the consideration they deserve at a Big Five publisher. Rebecca Borucki, the founder of Row House Publishing states: “I’m not trying to go for just more Black, brown, queer, and disabled voices on the shelves. I want to disproportionately stack the shelves with these voices.” A.J. Astrophel of Midnight Meadow says her goal is for every book they publish “to have a happy ending for at least one queer character.”

But the Big Five publishers are still hesitant to publish queer authors. The Big Five are the dominant publishing houses in the industry: Macmillan, Penguin Random House, Hachette, and Simon and Schuster. If you were to step into a bookstore anywhere in the US, 80% of the books you would pick up would be from one of these companies’ dozens of imprints. With the biggest weight to throw around, why won’t they take a chance on LGBTQ authors? One reason they state is the lack of comp titles. Publishing houses rely heavily on the numbers, to know what other books have done well and why, and which haven’t—comparative titles. When there’s a dearth of queer books published to give them statistics, they argue that this means queer books will do poorly, which in turns keeps them from being published to be comp titles for new queer books, and it becomes a vicious cycle. Independent publishers, with smaller budgets and less to lose, often are more willing to take the risk on these unknown books. Thanks to the risks these publishers take, more queer literature has been able to reach readers, but often at the cost of readers having to search through the sea of big five titles. When browsing any bookstore, whether online or in person, you’ll find that up to 80% of titles being sold are from the Big Five, which leaves not a lot of room for the little guys.

That’s why a lot of people turn to the internet for digital publications, like Jerry Portwood of [Queer Love Project](#). Previously an editor at *Out* and *Rolling Stone*, Portwood became jaded by the corporate scene; after over two decades in the industry, he wanted to do something that “mattered.” In 2024, he started sharing personal LGBTQ+-centered essays. In less than a year, his substack grew from 100 followers to over two thousand. Like the zines in the 80s and 90s, one-person productions can find their audience without the need to spend “tens of thousands of dollars.” Portwood’s project also includes a podcast that he can record from his home.

Amelia Possanza of Lavender Publicity says that things took a huge turn in mainstream publishing when Casey McQuiston took the scene. Macmillan took a leap with publishing McQuiston's novel *Red, White, and Royal Blue* in 2019. *Red, White, and Royal Blue*, a romance novel about a president's son and his "fake" relationship with the prince of England, shot up in popularity, hitting the New York Times bestseller list in June 2019 and winning an ALA Alex award in 2020. "I think it took off in a way nobody was expecting," Possanza says. "Casey really blew the doors open and made space for a lot of people." *Red, White, and Royal Blue* gave a comp title that the Big Five were arguing that they needed. Three novels later, McQuiston continues to sell well and win awards, their 2024 *The Pairing* being nominated for a Lambda Literary Award just this year.

Possanza has a lot to say about how one can publicize a book to get it to the readers who need it the most—and it's in a way that feels antithetical to how traditional publishers market their books. Traditional publishers, especially like the Big Five, want to pull in as many readers as possible with larger, more vague descriptions. "The strategy is that you can reach the most number of people by being like, it's a book about sisters, it's a book about a family with secrets, it's a book about baseball," she says as examples. "But a philosophy that I've seen emerge during my time in publishing, and that I very much believe in, is you can actually start with a core group of people who maybe share an identity with the characters or with the authors and are really excited because they haven't seen themselves represented very often in literature. And you grow from there."

Even with Macmillan taking a chance on McQuiston and getting good results (including an Amazon Prime movie deal), queer literature is anything but mainstream. Only a handful of queer authors have reached the heights of popularity that McQuiston has. When I interviewed Charlie Hunt about the "big names" in queer literature, we both reached for the same ones—McQuiston, Alexis Hall, and Aidan Thomas. Hunt has an eye on what's trending in queer literature through managing his bookstore, Charlie's Queer Books, in Seattle, Washington. "We don't always depend on the traditional systems providing space for us, so we create our own space. Indie publishing and self-publishing—you can see where we've carved our own space."

Being a genre specific store, Hunt is more than happy to provide a space for non-traditionally published authors. But his biggest challenge is being able to stock as many books as he wants to, and being limited in how he can purchase them. Getting books into the hands of readers requires distribution, a part of the publishing industry that is hard to find without using big names like Macmillan or Ingram Spark. Kindle Direct Publishing promises a large audience to self-published authors by getting their books on Amazon, but for booksellers like Hunt, there's no option to get Kindle Direct Publishing books into brick-

and-mortar stores. Ingram Spark allows a wholesale options, while KDP does not. Hunt says that a lot of their manga is distributed by Penguin Random House, even though it's not published through them. Similarly, Astrophel of Midnight Meadow Publishing relies on Ingram Spark to publish and distribute their novels, because they're simply not big enough to operate their own.

The Lambda Literary Awards and Stonewall Awards are a calculable way to see how queer literature has become more visible in the past few years. When the Lambda Literary awards began in 1989, it had 76 submissions across 14 categories. Now, in 2025, the number of submissions has surpassed 150 authors to compete across 25 categories. Similarly, in the year of its inception of 1971, the Stonewall awards had “a handful” of nominations. By 1995 they had over 800 submissions, and the number has only grown since then.

I feel inspired when I see the amount of queer literature on the market these days. But I also know there is still so much work left to do. There's no cut-and-dry solution to getting more queer literature on the market, nor one easy path to getting noticed by readers. There is no “better” option between independent presses, self-publishing, and traditional publishing powerhouses, or digital only options. But one thing I know is that there are a plethora of options out there. Readers have so many options of what to read, it doesn't take much to find something for everyone. The biggest thing readers can do is read, buy, share, and talk about queer literature to give the industry undeniable proof that we are here, and we want to see ourselves represented.

Read more:

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2023/06/lgbtq-book-challenges-are-on-the-rise-heres-why/>

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/banned-books-lgbtq-transgender-black-people-of-color-pen-america-rcna193879>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lambda_Literary_Awards

<https://www.ala.org/rrt/award/stonewall/history>