



BOY MEETS BOY AND GIRL MEETS GIRL, *OTAKU* STYLE

► ROBIN BRENNER

Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* is a runaway bestseller not only with teens but also with older readers. Although the supernatural elements add allure, two key elements make the series especially gripping. First it is unabashedly, spectacularly romantic, and second the taboo of human/vampire love ratchets up the tension to a fever pitch. Forbidden romance has always been tantalizing, from *Romeo and Juliet* onward, and both romance writers and their audiences know that every hurdle makes the anticipated lovers' embrace that much more satisfying.



Within the realm of Japanese manga, there are myriad engaging romances aimed at both guys and girls, but two romantic subgenres have been steadily climbing in popularity: boys love, or male/male romances aimed at female readers (sometimes called *shōnen-ai*), and *yuri*, or female/female romances aimed at male readers. *Otaku*, how devoted fans of anime identify themselves in the United States, began as a derogatory term in Japan, but it has been reclaimed to express the obsession with which readers approach the genre. *Otaku* in the U. S.

embrace these two subgenres, but the romantic stories and same-sex relationships draw in fans from outside that community of readers. In my own collection of more than 900 graphic novels for teens, among the top-ten circulators along with *Batman*, *Fruits Basket*, and *Naruto* is *Only the Ring Finger Knows*, a sweet, single-volume



quite accepting) make the melodrama more delicious.

boys-love title. Its prose sequels are the top circulators in my paperback romance collection. The appeal of these titles is clear: The characters are gorgeous but fallible, the romance is vital, and the obstacles (in this case, lovers of the same gender in a world that is not



The fact that the couples are of the same sex distracts new readers from the realization that boys love and *yuri* titles nonetheless run on the traditions and clichés that make any good romance work well. Familiar plot elements are part of the appeal, from awkward confessions to the final romantic embrace. Despite same-gender main characters, gender stereotypes are usually maintained. For example, a naïve, willowy young man might fall in love with an older, more macho male, or a cheerful, timid girl could be swept away by a beautiful, confident, upper-class woman. Everything from family disapproval to magical barriers to emotional misunderstandings creates conflict, but readers know love will win out.

Who reads these titles? Anyone who likes romance can enjoy boys love and *yuri*. Teen readers may be devoted fans or occasional readers, but if they already love manga, they're more likely to read a boys love or *yuri* title. In 2006, I began conducting an informal online survey of boys love readers through my Web site (<http://www.noflyingnotights.com>). Of the more than 200 responses, approximately 75 percent have been



from female readers and roughly 25 percent from male readers. In terms of sexuality, more than 70 percent self-identified as other than strictly heterosexual, with 30 percent identifying as gay or lesbian. The fact that these titles are populated with beautiful young men or women increases the appeal. Many teens said, “Two hot guys are better than one if you’re talking strictly eye candy.”

For many teens, particularly GLBTQ youth, the optimism and romance in many boys-love and *yuri* titles are vital, inviting them into a fairy tale where any disapproval is brushed aside in the face of true love. As one male teen wrote, “It makes me think that someday I might get a cute boyfriend, too.” Teens crave these essentially happy titles after a steady diet of “serious” reading. They are here to make readers swoon and avoid hard truths.

Currently a wide variety of boys-love titles are available in the United States, ranging from chaste romances with barely any kissing to titles intended for adult women (often called *yaoi*) that include explicit nudity and sex on par with prose romance novels for adults. Many teen fans will seek out more mature titles, especially as they head toward the eighteen-year-old end of teen readership. There are far fewer *yuri* titles available in the U.S., and they have only been published in the last year or so, making it difficult to gauge whether their audience will be as varied or demanding as the boys-love fans. As more *yuri* arrives in the U.S., though, readers will see the same content range as in boys love and *yaoi*.

There are a few common themes from these subgenres of which

selectors will want to be aware. As with many manga titles, there are standard romantic couples, including childhood sweethearts, students falling for teachers and vice versa, company colleagues, detectives, and samurai. A few of these may feel a bit risqué—as when a sixteen-year-old student falls for a twenty-five-year-old teacher—but these are fantasies and part of the fun comes from fulfilling daydreams. Similarly any resemblance to actual GLBTQ relationships is coincidental. Characters are frequently in love with that person only and don’t consider themselves gay or lesbian. The topic of how the characters identify their sexuality in most cases is not discussed. The looming disapproval of classmates or family might spur the romance into secret corners, but rarely do couples come out. Because many are set in a distant place (boys’ and girls’ academies, foreign countries, or in the past) realism is set aside for drama. Another common element in romance manga, not only in these subgenres, is the tendency of characters to allow passion to lead to force. Getting swept away by emotions is standard for any love story, but some titles skirt the edges of “no meaning no” in a way that can unnerve selectors and readers.

BOYS LOVE MANGA

There are countless boys-love titles that show as many longing glances as readers could want but never move beyond kissing. In the now classic but still popular **Only the Ring Finger Knows**, a most courteous upperclassman is suddenly, inexplicably rude to ordinary

guy Wataru. Wataru sets out to find the real personality behind the princely demeanor but is ambushed by his own feelings as he falls hopelessly in love. Or is it as hopeless as it seems? In **La Esperança**, a seemingly perfect goody-two-shoes is drawn to an attractive, devil-may-care bad boy, but past secrets could derail their unexpected friendship before it can go anywhere. **La Esperança** is built almost entirely on melodrama, from sudden revelations to fainting spells. Although emotions are high, the plot is tempered with humor, and throughout its seven volumes there is only one kiss. **Same Cell Organism’s** vignettes zero in on love blossoming between friends, lonely classmates, and a human and an angel. Light on plot, this title’s strength is in its dreamy, evocative art, which lingers on every glance and caress. For a change of pace from high schoolers, **Red** is a drama set during the Tokugawa Era, a time of iconic samurai and isolation from the outside world, and offers enough political intrigue to work as a conspiracy drama as well as the beginning of a romance. The new Korean *manhwa*, **Fever**, promises a more realistic case of same-sex yearning mixed with tales of teen outsiders.



Among the boys-love titles with a bit more action for older teen readers, several books address questions of sexual attraction and sex while being almost as explicit as heterosexual manga romances such as Fuyumi Soryo’s **Mars** or Ai Yazawa’s **Nana** and **Paradise Kiss**. These books are suited to older teens and might feature adult characters. In each title, the emphasis is on the growing relationship and environment, whereas sex scenes are few and driven by emotion. **Rin!** is set amidst a high school archery team. Katsura’s anxiety disorder can only be calmed before an exam or a competition by a quick hug from his older brother’s friend, Sou. The frequent embraces cause a lot of gossip, but even as Katsura starts to realize that Sou makes his



heart race for a variety of reasons, Sou is struggling not to take advantage of Katsura's weakness. Yukine Honami's art is a nice break from the polished prettiness in much manga and is particularly good at showing characters' expressions and the discipline that archery requires. **Camera Camera Camera's** lighthearted two volumes start with the main character crushing on his step-brother in a level of devotion similar to idol-worship, but soon an attentive, scruffy photographer makes him question what real love might be.

Loveholic and **Shout Out Loud** are two of the milder boys-love titles featuring adult characters. They are both notable for emphasizing character

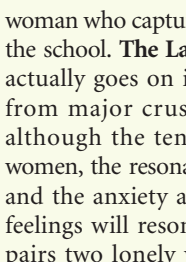


over sex. **Shout Out Loud** features two romances—one between a baby-faced voice actor, Shino, and his challenging costar and the other between Shino's son Nakaya and a hockey teammate. **Shout Out Loud** develops into a realistic exploration of family and love rather than merely a passion-fueled romance.

Loveholic uses the familiar "I argue with you, I must love you" plot, when a photographer and ad executive challenge each other as they work together in photo shoots and managing models. Toko Kawaii's art favors lean, sexy figures, and her men are full of foibles and quirks that make them human rather than walking romantic ideals.

YURI MANGA

The Seven Seas *yuri* imprint, Strawberry, features romances akin to mild boys-love titles. Many stories take place in girls' academies—the same way boys-love titles often take place in boys schools—and the stories highlight the yearning of first love. Despite the misleading title, **First Love Sisters** is not about sibling affection but follows cheerful Chika as she struggles to gain a place in the illustrious Tsunojo Girls' School, not for academic success



but to see the upper-class woman who captured her heart when she toured the school. **The Last Uniform** investigates what actually goes on in an all-girls' school dorm, from major crushes to study sessions, and although the tension is between the young women, the resonance of first love, confessions, and the anxiety around how to express one's feelings will resonate with any teen. **Voiceful** pairs two lonely young women—one on the



edge of being agoraphobic and the other an isolated singer who prefers releasing her songs online rather than performing live. After a coincidental meeting, their friendship grows and pushes each to find her internal strength—with no physical shows of affection, merely a growing love between the girls.

The more mature or explicit *yuri* titles include **Strawberry Panic**, another elite girls'-



academy tale focused on a competition between three prestigious girls to show off the best pair of *etoiles* (school ambassadors or stars), and **Kannazuki no Miko**, a mish-mash of a giant robot mecha, superpowered teens, and lesbian romance. Both read more like the



older boys-love titles and feature nudity, groping, and fan service (gratuitous content for the fans rather than for the advancement of plot or character). Fan service can mean anything from full-frontal nudity (often in a dreamy but not terribly detailed style) to more intimate caresses, although both the *Strawberry* and *Kannazuki no Miko* series so far have no explicit sexuality. For a title that is

realistic and cute as a button about being a lesbian in Japan, older teens will love **Rica'tte Kanji!?** by Rica Takashima. The story follows the adventures of college freshman Rica, new to Nichome, Tokyo's gay and lesbian district, as she adjusts to being in a big city, being out as a lesbian, and falling in love for the first time. The drawing style is very cute and simple, similar to **Hello Kitty**, and although there are a few flashes of what two women might do in bed together, it's only a few panels and not at all detailed. Faced with the myriad of off-the-wall fantasies flying around in both boys love and *yuri*, it's refreshing to see a title that's actually representative of what being GLBTQ in Japan is like as well as being a sweet romance.

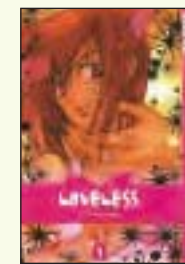
ADULT-MARKETED TITLES

There are several titles that directly appeal to teens in how they reflect the emotions, relationships, and intensity of coming-of-age and beginning relationships, but fit best into an adult collection because of their eventual sexual content. The publishers try to warn selectors through rating the series as a whole rather than the individual volumes. For example, *The Moon and the Sandals* series, despite initially appearing innocent, is rated mature, giving the signal that more explicit content will appear in future installments. **Little Butterfly** is a three-volume romance between two classmates. Kojima is a sunny, good guy who starts off trying to cheer up melancholy loner Nakahara. As Kojima discovers that Nakahara has a complicated family life involving mental illness and abuse, the two boys find solace in each other and start an intense but tender relationship. As the volumes progress, the boys get farther and farther along in terms of physical closeness, until they finally have sex, in panel, in the third volume. **Desire** is a similarly evocative title that resonates with teens as they confuse the differences between falling in love and indulging in lust only to hurt each other.



ALMOST YURI/YAOI TITLES

In addition to the strictly boys-love and *yuri* titles available, there are many manga series that appeal to boys-love and manga fans but do not fit precisely in the subgenre. **Loveless**, often listed as a favorite by my teen readers, features an intense relationship between a twelve-year-old boy, Ritsuka, and a college-age man, Soubi. Nothing is ordinary about their relationship



within the premise, and although Soubi repeatedly declares that he's not interested in Ritsuka romantically, the intensity of their devotion to each other means that the *Loveless* series sends conflicting signals. In the complex but deftly thrilling series *After School Nightmare*, Ichijou, who is both boy and girl, must choose whether to live a "normal" life as a boy with a girlfriend or choose to change by identifying as a girl and settling with a boyfriend. The charming **Antique Bakery**, which will most likely appeal to older teens, features a gay lead character, but it is not considered boys love because romance is not the focus and the story is not a fantasy but instead a character-driven comedy and workplace drama.

AND ON THE AMERICAN FRONT



As more and more fans of boys love and *yuri* grow up and demand additional titles, creators outside of Japan join in the fun by creating books that reflect their sensibilities. One of the strongest U. S. titles on the market is Jen Lee Quick's New York-based **Off*beat**. The plot has many elements that keep boys-love fans happy, including pretty but slightly dorky boys, a potential

supernatural connection, and slowly building tension. Unlike Japanese titles, however, **Off*beat** is distinctly American in how its ten characters define sexuality and the strong sense of place in Brooklyn. Other manga-style comics appeal as well, from Rivkah's **Steady Beat**, with its lesbian romance thread, to the second **Hopeless Savages: Ground Zero**, with one gay brother's romance that is intercut with his younger sister's rocky start in love. **Skim** is not manga style but is a new, stellar coming-of-age story set in high school that realistically addresses topics of popularity, outcasts, and the first blush of lesbian desire. None of these titles are as melodramatic as their Japanese counterparts, but the romance is still the core story.

The key to boys love and *yuri* is to remember that it is essentially about fairy-tale romance. There may be dark moments, as there are witches and curses in any fairy tale worth its salt, but true love will conquer all and every prince will get his perfect match—he just happens to be another prince. ■

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