

Selling books with Charlie's bedroom: Heartstopper and its commercial contexts

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Books serve as conduits for anxieties about a wide range of social issues. In recent years we have seen this particularly in relation to titles which contain –or are perceived to contain– LGBTQ+ subject matter for younger audiences. Paradoxically, at a time when representation for young queer people in literature has never been stronger, access to it is under sustained attack. In this paper I explain two ways in which bookselling has resisted angry calls for the censorship of such material from school and public libraries in particular, by exploring Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* (2016-present). A phenomenon of note for its broad queer representation, global audience, and –no less importantly– commercial success, the books have sold over 8 million copies in dozens of languages, propelled to an astonishing reach after Netflix adaptation (2022-present). Firstly, I will consider these books themselves as sites of resistance. From self-published crowdfunded number, mass-market paperbacks, collectible seller-specific hardbacks, and subscription-box Fairyloot editions, the materiality of these titles matters deeply to customers young and old., and exists explicitly within particular commercial contexts. Secondly, the replica of protagonist Charlie Spring's bedroom which was setup in Waterstones in Piccadilly in 2022 to mark the release of the first season of the Netflix adaptation saw a significant amount of flagship retail space e given over to celebrating young, queer joy, before subsequent resurrection at Barnes and Noble in New York in July 2023, Indigo in Toronto in January 2024, and most recently at Barnes and Noble in Los Angeles in September 2024. I consider how this celebration of queer joy is no less defiant for its undoubted commercialism, and what it tells us about the importance of books to queer people.

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