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**Words, Characters and Messages  
in the Queer Romance of Generation Z**

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**Kalina Yocheva**

Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen

E-mail: yocheva@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This article presents an attempt to analyze the structural elements and characters that make Casey McQuiston's debut novel *Red, White & Royal Blue* so popular with readers, as well as the challenges posed to viewers by director Matthew Lopez and the creative team of the eponymous film, which immediately became a cultural phenomenon with many fans among viewers. The novel and its film adaptation follow the relationship between two young men from prominent families against the constraints of a heteronormative society. The article investigates a pertinent and contemporary issue from a social and intercultural perspective. The primary objective is to identify and examine linguistic and communicative characteristics, including the contextual use of words and expressions, within a specific socio-cultural framework as depicted in two distinct art forms: literature and cinema. The analysis incorporates comparative elements by referencing well-known works that address similar themes related to cultural differences, behavioral patterns, stereotypes, prejudices concerning LGBTQ+, queer, cultural dynamics of Generation Z, and the influence of heteronormative societal structures. This text seeks to delineate the boundaries of a new interdisciplinary research field focused on the concept of difference. It aims to propose potential research methodologies that contribute to the development of a comprehensive methodological framework, free from bias. In accordance with the principles of academic correctness, the novel and the film *Red, White & Royal Blue* are analyzed.

**Keywords:** Red, White & Royal Blue, RW&RB, new adult fiction, Casey McQuiston, Matthew López, Generation Z, rom-com, LGBTQ+, queer.

**Introduction**

On May 14, 2019, Casey McQuiston's debut novel *Red, White & Royal Blue* is released, and only a month later it is on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The book enjoys a wide public response and manages to gather numerous fans. On August 11, 2023 readers receive a gift – a film adaptation of McQuiston's text, which in a very short time becomes the most watched film in the world and one

of the three most watched romantic comedies on Amazon Prime Video, and leads to a huge number of new subscribers to the streaming platform. [1] This text is an attempt to explain the popularity of the book and its screen version by examining the communicative acts and the significant elements in the different languages – the verbal (of the book) and the audiovisual (of the film).

### **Methodology**

The presented study relies on structural-semiotic analysis to track the different speech levels in the written text, as well as the significant elements in the screen adaptation that lead to an impact on the readership and audience. Due to the peculiarities of the different types of text and the specific tools used in each of them, they are presented consecutively – the verbal text as the basis and the subsequent audiovisual text. The cultural code of the book implies an analysis of the picture of the world created by the author, with an emphasis on the significant elements that allow to achieve the depth of the image and form the content and messages of the work. The film, in turn, relies on its own system of tools shaping characters, situations, screen reality and suggestions.

### **The book**

*Red, White & Royal Blue* is a typical romantic comedy “from enemies to lovers” with beautiful characters, obstacles to their relationship, social pressure, pests, a happy ending, even an almost magical helper. This modern fairy tale [2] in a genre defined as *new adult fiction* [3], draws the reader into a world that is too different from reality and too optimistic. The dedication recorded on the first page of the text is logical: „for the weirdos & the dreamers”. [4] The addressee is also defined in the book itself, indicating the generation to which the characters belong – Generation Z. “Gen Z is mad at boomers for the state of the world”. [5] That is why in this book the world is different, it is not what we see, but what we want it to be.

The book arouses great interest among readers, who ranks it first in two categories in *Goodreads* in 2019 – Best Romance Book [6], Best Debut Novel [7] and *Vogue* names it one of the best novels of the same year. [8]

Critical reviews of the novel are also positive. “Effervescent and empowering on all levels, *Red, White & Royal Blue* is both a well-written love story and a celebration of identity. McQuiston may not be royal herself, but her novel reigns as must read rom-com.” [9] *Kirkus Reviews* defines the book as “A clever, romantic, sexy love story.” [10] According to *Time*, the novel “is emblematic of a new generation of love story that has conquered pop culture. I call it wholesome romance.” [11]

Queer romance can explain to some extent the interest of the LGBTQ+ community in the work, since most of the known works on this topic are related

to issues such as AIDS, violence, hostility, misunderstanding and rejection of people with different sexual orientations, and here the narrative is positive and outside of traditionally presented problems. At the same time, the book enjoys interest not only among this audience, but covers a much wider range of readers. This is an occasion to look for those elements in the text that make the work a universal and desirable read for a large and diverse audience.

The main characters in the novel are Alex Claremont-Diaz (with a Mexican father) the son of the American president (in the book, the president is a woman) and Prince Henry, a young royal from England, the son of a princess and a famous actor who played the role of James Bond. When Alex is invited to the wedding of the crown prince, Henry's older brother, the two young men cause a public scandal, leading to negative comments in the media and affecting negotiations between the two countries. In an attempt to minimize the damage, PR experts from the White House and the British royal family create a situation that aims to instill to the public that the two young men are close friends, and thus divert the attention of the tabloids from the absurd incident.

The arranged joint activities, including Alex's visit to the prince's palace in London, photos, interviews, charity events and controlled social media posts, are not greeted favorably by the two characters, who are hostile to each other, but in the process of forced communication, they begin to get to know each other, creating a hesitant friendship, maintained at first through online communication and phone conversations and messages, later than personal meetings, and this leads to an intimate relationship between them, which deepens and turns into emotional connection. When the secret romantic relationship between the two becomes an object of public interest, it not only puts their feelings to the test, but also threatens the future of their families, which are institutions in their countries – presidential election in the United States is coming up and the traditions of the English royal family are violated.

The main characters are radically different from each other – apparently completely opposite: Alex is sociable to the point of aggressiveness, dynamic, open in his clear aspirations to become a politician – a member of the United States Congress before he turns thirty. The events in the book are presented on behalf of a neutral narrator, but mainly follow his point of view. Henry is closed, reserved, and strictly adheres to the rules imposed by his position as a member of the royal family. At the beginning of the book, what they have in common is that they are young, beautiful, charismatic and often compared to each other. Their gradual rapprochement, the change in their relationship, the development of each of them presents a much deeper characteristic. Readers see their vulnerabilities, fears, and aspirations, which each of them reveals to the other in order to become the most important people to each other.

The communicative dynamics of the text can be traced at different levels: the language of the narrator – in the description of the characters, their actions, thoughts and states; real dialogues during the meetings of the characters; online communication and telephone calls and messages; letters from celebrities that the characters cite in their emails. “McQuiston’s strength is in dialogue; her characters speak in hilarious rapid-fire bursts with plenty of “likes,” “ums,” creative punctuation, and pop-culture references, sounding like smarter, funnier versions of real people.” [12]

“True love isn't always diplomatic” – warns us the message of the book, which we see on the cover. In accordance with this declaration, the author does not look for the convenient, but for the right words – corresponding to the emotional vocabulary of the generation for which they are intended, sometimes vulgar and challenging. Such use of the word is not new and it has its functions in building the overall suggestion of the text. In the Introduction to his essay “Writing Degree Zero” Roland Barthes points out: “Hebert [13], the revolutionary, never began a number of his news-sheet *Le Pere Duchene* without introducing a sprinkling of obscenities. These improprieties had no real meaning, but they had significance. In what way? In that they expressed a whole revolutionary situation. Now here is an example of a mode of writing whose function is no longer only communication or expression, but the imposition of something beyond language, which is both History and the stand we take in it.” [14] Casey McQuiston's creative writing includes a large number of similar “improprieties”, especially in the dialogues and letters between the characters. Alex's speech behavior at the beginning of the book confirms this statement. A typical representative of Generation Z, he shows his expressiveness both in his actions and in his words. Still in the stage of mutual dislike, at the first meeting with Henry in Kensington palace as false “friends”, he greets the prince with the words: “I’m going to throw up on you” as a reaction to the irritatingly perfect appearance of the host, and Henry's answer is seemingly polite, but no less defiant: “Hello, Alex.” (...) “You look... sober.” The transfer of responsibility for the consequences of their joint actions to the other is characteristic of the behavior of both at the beginning, but it is expressed in different lines. The speech model that Alex adheres to is that of a rebellious child, contains quite profanity, which is consistent with his arrogant model of behavior. And as we will see later, this also has something to do with History (love, contemporary, past). Later, in a letter to Henry, Alex writes: “History, huh? Bet we could make some.” Henry is different, he adheres mainly to formal communication, rarely crosses the line of decency. After the two begin correspondence with messages, Alex finds that “Henry hardly ever swears, but at least he doesn’t seem to mind Alex’s filthy fucking mouth.”

The dynamics of their relationship, the gradual building of trust are noticeable in the emails between them, which are an important part of the book

and make it possible to clearly characterize both the men, their personal positions and their development, as well as their personal stories and relationships. The snarky mocking tone at the beginning of their correspondence gradually turns into friendly and intimate teasing. The spelling and punctuation in their letters follow the established rules of online communication typical of young people.

**In the addresses:** Alex to Henry: *His Royal Highness Prince Henry of Whatever, Don't make me learn your actual title // Huge Raging Headache Prince Henry of Who Cares // Horrible Revolting Heir // His Royal Horniness // H // Henry*

Henry to Alex: *First Son of Off-Brand England // First Son of Hating Fund-raisers // First Son of Shirking Responsibilities // First Son of Inappropriately Timed When I'm in Early Morning Meetings // First Son of Making Me Spill My Tea in Said Early Morning Meeting // Alex // First Son of Masturbatory Historical Readings // Alex*

**In the signature:** Alex to Henry: *First Son of Your Former Colony // Alex, First Son of Hating Fund-raisers // Alex, First Son of Questionable Late Night Emails // Alex, First Son of Cheese Shopping and Blowjob // xoxo, A // Affectionately yrs, slowly going insane, Alex, First Son of Founding Father Sacrilege // Yrs, Alex // Love you. xoxoxoxoxo A // Love you. A // I miss you I miss you I miss you I love you. A // fucking yours a*

Henry to Alex: *Regards, His Royal Highness Prince Henry of Wales // Regards, Harangued Royal Highness // Regards, Handsome Royal Heretic // I'll be damned but I miss you x Henry // Yours in sexual frustration, Henry // Regards, Haplessly Romantic Heretic Prince Henry the Utterly Daft // I miss you. x Henry // Yours, Henry*

Henry's formal greetings and signatures at the beginning of their communication are consistent with all his behavior. Henry's speech is largely protocol, he is as if trained, often automatically agreeing with the action that is prescribed to him by the words of the interlocutor. At the New Year's Eve party at the White House, Alex convinces Henry to dance by showing him the moves: "Here." Alex says moving his own hips, "watch me." ...Henry says, "I am." In Alex's room: "Hey," he (Alex) says. He pokes Henry in the arm. "Don't freak out." "I'm not freaking out," he says, enunciating the words." Such remarks, as well as his entire behavior at the beginning, present him as restrained, unemotional, following instructions. Alex's impression is that Henry is like a robot, and he constantly challenges him to break the routine and show his true image: "...he wishes that once, just once, Henry would act like an actual human and not some polished little windup toy sold in a palace gift shop". In his typically snarky style, he explains the need to sign a lengthy non-disclosure agreement about Henry during his visit to the palace: "It's probably in case I see his equerry putting his batteries back in." Their gradual rapprochement leads to the hesitant disclosure to each

other of their deep problems, which sometimes turn out to be very similar. They begin to feel so close emotionally that in difficult situations each of them looks for support in the other. Sharing childhood memories, everyday events, opinions about books and personalities helps them find common ground in their interests, values, fears, dreams, and vision of the world.

Alex's change of perspective on Henry leads to his desire not only to get to know his friend better, but also to protect him once he begins to understand his sensitivity and vulnerability. Even before he realizes his attraction to Henry, he intuitively wants to share his problems, although he is not yet fully aware of his feelings, nor does he understand how Henry feels for him. When the prince runs away from the New Year's party, he explains his actions with the words: "Sometimes it gets a bit ... much." (...) "These things – big events, letting other people feed on his own energy – are rarely too much for Alex. He's not sure how Henry feels, but some part of his brain (...) thinks maybe it would be helpful if Henry could take what he can handle, and Alex could handle the rest." Imperceptibly for Alex, what he initially considers only a sexual adventure begins to turn into something much bigger and more important, but he is still afraid to name it: "It should be hot, stupid, ridiculous, obscene, another wild sexual adventure to add to the list. And it is, but ... it shouldn't also feel like... Alex might die if it ever stops."

Alex gradually begins to realize how Henry's every word, every gesture becomes meaningful and attractive to him, even just his voice, even at the phonetic level: "Oh," Henry says, like an idiot. Alex hates how much he likes the way that one stupid vowel curls in his accent. He's not even into British accent. He's into *Henry's* British accent." (...) "Er," Henry says, adding to the list of vowel sounds he has to show for himself. It is, unfortunately, also sexy."

Each of them finds in the emails their own way of confessing their feelings at first without naming them directly. Playing with time and space is one way to emphasize the importance of the other for one's own personality. For Henry, these are the memories of significant events in his life, which he distributes in "...all the dark, dusty rooms of Buckingham Palace." He leaves the memory of his sister's drug problems "... in a room with pink peonies on the wallpaper and a golden harp in the center of the floor." For his first intimate relationship, he singles out "... the smallest, most cramped little broom cupboard muster...". For the last night of his sick father, he chooses "...the biggest room, a ballroom, wide open and dark, windows drawn and covered." He remembers his first meeting with Alex, but he does not put this memory in a room: "But the first time I saw you... I took that down to the gardens. I pressed it into the leaves of a silver maple and recited it to the Waterloo Vase. It didn't fit in any rooms."

Alex describes Henry's space and place in it in a letter called "bad metaphors about maps". He writes: "... on the map of you, my fingers can always

find the green hills, wales. cool waters and a shore of white chalk. the ancient part of you carved out stone in a prayerful circle, sacrosanct. your spine`s a ridge I`d die climbing. (...) give yourself away sometimes, sweetheart, there`s so much of you.” He knows the Henry map, but he doesn't own the territory yet. [15]

Alex's habit of making lists of everything is also reflected in listing in a confused order twenty things he loves about Henry, including: “1. The sound of your laugh when I piss you off. (...) 4. How your hands look when you play piano. (...) 12. That when your shoulders cover mine, nothing else in the entire stupid world matters. (...) 14. The way you look when you first wake up. (...) 16. Your huge, generous, ridiculous, indestructible heart. (...) 20. The fact that you loved me all along.”

When their own words are not enough to express their feelings, they resort to the help of letters from famous lovers from the past, which they quote in their emails. The inclusion of a letter in the letter not only enhances the emotionality of their correspondence, but is also a sign of the intellectual depth of their relationship, of knowing the lives of historical figures (some of them with a scandalous reputation) who had strong feelings for each other, regardless of their gender.

Henry to Alex: “I think perhaps Hamilton said it better in a letter to Eliza [16]: *You engross my thoughts too intirely to allow me to think of any thing else – you not only employ my mind all day; but you intrude upon my sleep.*”

Alex to Henry: “P.S. Allen Ginsberg to Peter Orlovsky – 1958 [17]: *Tho I long for the actual sunlight contact between us I miss you like a home. Shine back honey & think of me.*”

...From Henry James to Hendrik C. Andersen [18], 1899... Vita Sackville to Virginia Woolf [19] – 1927... From Radclyffe Hall to Evguenia Souline [20], 1934... Eleanor Roosevelt to Lorena Hickock [21] – 1933... From Michelangelo to Tommaso Cavalieri [22], 1533... Richard Wagner to Eliza Wille, re: Ludwig II [23] – 1864... wilfred owen to siegfried sassoon [24] – 1917... From Jean Cocteau to Leam Marais [25], 1939.

In these letters, Alex sees hope for both of them: “Words that went down in history. “Meet you in every dream... Keep most of your heart in Washington... Miss you like a home... We two longing loves... My young king.” *One day*, he tells himself. *One day, us too.*”

Twice Henry interrupts their communication. The first time is after the New Year's Eve party, where he takes the first step towards Alex, but then he runs away and does not respond to his messages and phone calls. Later, he admits: “...I wasn't sure you weren't going murder me for kissing you.” The second time is after Alex's attempt to confess his feelings to him. Henry explains: “It was never supposed to be an issue, (...) I thought I could have some part of you, and just never say it, and you'd never have to know, and one day you'd get tired of me

and leave, because I'm –" He stops short, and one shaking hand moves through the air in front of him in a helpless sort of gesture at everything about himself. "I never thought I'd be stood here faced with a choice I can't make, because I never... I never imagined you would love me back." In both cases, Alex does not give up on him. Henry takes the risk of starting their relationship, but Alex saves it.

The relationship that is created and developed between them is multifaceted and dynamic, on different levels – physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual. The physical connection takes up a large part of the book, but if it remains only at this level, their relationship would not be complete. Physical attraction leads to emotional attachment, which both characters resist at first, as they are aware that this can create serious problems not only for them, but also for their families and countries. In the process of communication, in addition to their physical and emotional connection, it becomes clear that they are deeply connected intellectually, sharing their opinions about books, events, personalities. Alex is surprised to learn of the prince's interest in pop culture when he hears him discussing Star Wars [26] with a girl with cancer, and is impressed by Henry's later comment in a text message: "One does not foster a lifelong love to Star Wars without knowing an "empire" isn't good thing." Strange words for a member of the British royal family. Henry constantly proves that he is not just a beautiful toy that his family to show to the media, but a socially responsible person – he participates in many charity projects without advertising this participation. The prince can talk for hours about music, about books, about history, about different brands of gin or about sailing. He proudly explains to Alex the historical and cultural value of the sculptures in the Victoria and Albert Museum, but questions the human dimensions of the cost of these artefacts, comparing it to his own "crime": "What kind of legacy? What kind of *family*, that says, we'll take the murder, we'll take the raping and pillaging and colonizing, we'll scrub it up nice and neat in a museum, but, oh, no, you're a bloody poof? That's beyond our sense of decorum!"

As the fourth dimension can be pointed out their spiritual connection – realized by Alex, demonstrated by the prince. Henry, brought up as a member of the royal family, often uses words related to God in his speech: "Oh God", "Christ.", "For Christ's sake." At his first physical contact with Alex "...his sweet, posh voice reciting a litany of profanities to the ceiling". The fact that Henry accepts their relationship at this initial moment as a sin is also confirmed by his behavior – he is "...looking up to the ceiling again like a man seeking penance from a wrathful god". As the relationship between the two develops, the inclusion of a serious emotional commitment also changes the perception of their intimate contacts. When Alex visits Kensington, Henry no longer considers the relationship between them to be wrong, he "...moans the name of God so many times that the room feels consecrated."



Raised as a Catholic, Alex worries about how his father will accept his relationship with the prince: “I thought you might need to, like, have a Catholic moment about this or something?” He does not consider their relationship to be a sin, but rather views them as blessed by God. In one of his letters to Henry, he writes: “Your love so much bigger than yourself, bigger than everything. I can’t believe how lucky I am to even witness it – to be the one who gets to have it, and so much of it, is beyond luck and feels like fate Catholic God made me to be the person you write those things about. I’ll say five Hail Marys. Muchas gracias, Santa Maria.” At the Victoria and Albert Museum, in front of the altar of the church from 15. century with the statues of St. Clara and St. Francis of Assisi, Alex kisses Henry, and in his head sounds “... old proverb from catechism, mixed up between translations of the book: “Come, hijo mio, de la miel, porque es Buena, and the honeycomb, sweet to thy taste.” (...) “He brings Henry’s hand to his mouth and kisses the little knob of his knuckle, the skin over the blue vein there, bloodlines, pulses, the old blood kept in perpetuity within these walls, and he thinks, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.*”

Both characters are faced with a difficult choice – to continue their relationship or to give up what they consider most important in their lives. For Alex, this is his future as a politician, for Henry – his status as heir to the throne. When Alex reveals himself to his mother, she removes him from his campaign job, which is a huge chance for him to prove his abilities, but he chooses to be with Henry. When the prince realizes the strength of his feelings, he makes a serious gesture – he removes the ring with the seal from his finger and gives it to Alex: “I want you to know, I’m sure. A thousand percent.”, thus changing his commitment to the monarchy with his commitment to his loved one. Alex’s mascot hangs around his neck – a key to his mother’s home in Austin. He adds Henry’s ring on the chain next to the key: “...two homes side by side.”

Even the disclosure of their relationship and the publication of their letters in the media does not dissuade them from each other. Alex realizes his sexuality in his relationship with Henry, but he has no problem with it. His family supports him and if he has to hide, it is because of the circumstances surrounding the prince. Henry, on the other hand, has always been aware of his sexual orientation, but before his meeting with Alex, he perceives himself as a problem incompatible with his position as a member of the royal family. What Alex initially sees as restraint is actually Henry’s resignation that he will never be happy: “My birthright is a *country*, not happiness.” He does not even believe that he has the right to choose: “I’ve always thought of myself as a problem that deserved to stay hidden. Never quite trusted myself, or what I wanted. Before you, I was all right letting everything happen to me. I honestly have never thought I deserved to choose.” (...) “But you treat me like I do.”

Despite the problems caused by the publication of their emails and the scandal fueled by the media, a small part of Alex is glad that he can finally openly declare his feelings for Henry in front of everyone: "... the cocky shithead part of him is slightly pleased to finally have a claim on Henry. Yep, the prince? Most eligible bachelor in the world? British accent, face like a Greek god, legs for days? *Mine*." He worries about Henry, who can only be himself in his letters to Alex, but after many years of living in a lie, the prince makes a decision: "I won't lie. Not about this. Not about you."

The ending, of course, is happy (after all, we are talking about an ideal world). Henry's problems are solved with the unexpected appearance of his mother, who supports him. People from all over the world welcome Alex and Henry. The monarchy is modernized, the presidential elections are won. "We won." are the last words of the characters at the end of the book.

The story told in the novel is definitely the source of his success. But much more important is how it is presented to readers. Casey McQuiston's mastery of using words to build the complex characters, the description of situations and the structuring of the text is undeniable. The use of communication patterns from online communication, the violation of certain grammatical and punctuation norms builds a dynamic of the text, which creates tension in readers and they empathize with the feelings of the characters. The power of the author really is in dialogue, not only in face-to-face meetings, but much more in email communication, which is the preferred form of exchange between representatives of the Generation Z. An interesting approach is the inclusion of epistolary models from the past in support of expressing relations from the present. The intertwining of history and modernity in support of a cause that is still considered controversial in our world has won many fans of the novel. The huge number of fans of the book shows that despite the concerns of researchers, young adults still read. And everyone loves fairy tales.

### **The film**

When a book becomes a movie, there is always a risk that it will not meet the expectations of readers. Especially when there are so many of them, as in the case of *Red, White & Royal Blue*. To the delight of the audience, this film not only stays true to the book, preserves the magic of meeting the characters, but also builds on the situations with many challenges. The audience's reception of the film is exceptional. "Shortly after release, *Red, White & Royal Blue* became the most popular film on Amazon's Prime Video, and its third most-watched rom-com of all time." [27]

The script does not exactly follow the events in the book. Clearly, this is not possible with the adaptation for screen presentation, but screenwriters Matthew López and Ted Malawer retain the spirit, the emotion and dynamics of

the narrative. In addition to co-writing, Matthew López is the director of the film. He is a famous theater director, Tony Award winner, but this is his debut film. Although the film is presented in the rom-com genre, there are many dramatic elements in it, so the director prefers to call it a love story [28].

The film is created with extreme love for the book and with responsibility to its fans. Finding the right actors for the roles of the two main characters is a key moment in the preparation of the film adaptation, without which the film simply cannot exist. [29] The casting of the actors for the roles of Alex and Henry is so precise that they seem to have come out of the pages of the book. Casey McQuiston are talking in an interview that when *they* [30] meet actors Taylor Zakhar Perez and Nicholas Galitzine as Alex and Henry, they feel something of a “psychological collapse” to see the characters their imagination create come to life. [31] The chemistry between the two characters is so strong that it deserves separate research. And the camera of experienced cinematographer Stephen Goldblatt definitely loves them.

In the alternate world of this film, the United States has a female president elected in 2016 (Uma Thurman), the Prime Minister of Great Britain is a black [32] lady (Sharon D. Clarke), and instead of a queen, as in the book, a king (Stephen Fry) appears here, in accordance with the changes that occur in the British royal family between the release of the book in 2019 and the shooting of the film in 2022. Alex and Henry have the same characteristics as in the book, but they are a little older, and the possibilities of cinematography allow their characters to be built differently. The written text relies on the imagination of the readers, while in the film, visualization tools allow the characters to be presented to the audience in a form chosen by the director. According to López, this film is “...unabashedly and unapologetically romantic and hopeful and that is fills with gorgeous luminous performances from actors at the top of their game across the board.” [33]

The film begins defiantly – with the media reaction to the grand royal wedding. The public image of the characters is presented through the comments of journalists: Henry is called “Prince of England's Hearts”, Alex – “the charismatic son of the American president” and “the American Prince Henry”. However, the characters' opinion of each other is completely different: Alex about Henry: “He`s such a snob. So smug and entitled. He`s the world`s rudest person.” The prince about Alex: “He`s very... animated. He`s the world`s most irritating person.” Henry looks confident and presentable, he is in his place at this wedding, he is dressed in a suit that demonstrates his position in society. He publicly shows his disdain for the president's son. Alex is worried, the formal suit is not his usual attire, he feels out of place, he tries to compensate for his anxiety with alcohol and repeatedly violates etiquette: he throws his biscuit behind the couch, takes a

glass that the bartender hands to another guest, behaves rudely and defiantly with Henry.

Literally a huge metaphor rises before the eyes of the audience from the very first shots – a multi-storey pompous cake as a symbol of the royal institution itself, and perhaps as a warning about how much “sugar” awaits us in this film. We also see a revolutionary-minded prince – Henry, who quietly resents the high price of the cake. With a bang on the table, the drunken Alex shakes the senseless confectionery creation – as a prediction of his future role in the life of the monarchy. “Who doesn’t love a little Mozart?” – he tries to fit into the pretentious tone of the event, and Henry corrects him with some embarrassment: “Actually, it’s Schubert.”

Many times in the film, Henry corrects Alex's words, emphasizing the formal characteristics of the expressions. During their first interview: Alex: “I love ... the dogs that, uh, that wear the sweaters.” Henry: “Well, actually we say “jumpers.” In the letters: Alex: “...my pants.” Henry: “By the way, we call them “trousers”, not “paints”, dear.” Sometimes, even jokingly, Henry allows himself manifestations of snobbery: “Wait, don’t they have napkins in Texas?” // “God, sometimes I forget how uncultured you Americans are.” // “Oh, sorry. I’m white and upper-class – so my affection comes with strings.”

The presentation of stereotypical differences between Americans and Britons (not only at the linguistic level) in the film is not an end in itself, it is a demonstration of the enormous distance between the two young people and their lifestyle. The visual toolkit is fully used to present the differences between them. Henry's room is like a theatrical setting (in his life everything is a performance), there is nothing in it that represents his true personality. Above his bed hangs “Whalers” [34] by William Turner [35] – a painting from the time of Romanticism that matches the furniture, but not the character. The only thing in the palace to which Henry is attached is the grand piano – music is his escape. In Alex's room, a painting with an inscription in Spanish hangs above the bed, a reference to the song “Cielo y Tierra” by Marcos Barrientos [36], which is also a sign of the character's bilingualism. The viewer learns about Alex's interest in lacrosse, sees the books he reads, photos and souvenirs, his favorite pillow, clothes, hats and shoes in his closet, which allows to build a more complete image of the character.

Both young people read, but different literature. The authors and the books they recommend to each other also give an idea of their personalities. Henry: Zadie Smith [37], “The picture of Dorian Gray” [38], “Madame Bovary” [39]. Alex: “Another country” by James Baldwin [40], “Love in the Time of Cholera” [41]. Henry talks on the phone about Byron's poetry [42] so passionately that Alex threatens to block him. An interesting detail is that during this conversation, Alex is watching a movie in the company of his best friend Nora (Rachel Hilson),

and shortly after we find out that Henry cannot sleep and watches Bake Off [43] on TV with his dog. At the New Year's Eve party, the girls fight which of them to kiss Alex, but no one kisses Henry. Alex is rarely left without company, while the prince is obviously lonely.

At his parents' house, Alex reads "One Last Stop" [44] by Casey McQuiston (the director is really a joker). In the same scene, Henry reads "Girl, Woman, Other" by Bernardine Evaristo [45]. Both books are related to queer issues, but McQuiston is an American author, and Evaristo is a British author – a President of the Royal Society of Literature. This is not the only presence of the author of the book in the film. At the end, there is a cameo of McQuiston in the role of secretary to the American president.

During the interview at the beginning of the film, when the two characters have to show the media that they are friends, each of them behaves according to their idea of friendly behavior. Alex describes Henry's obvious external characteristics ("white, blond and British"), breaks etiquette – he playfully hits Henry's shoulder with his fist, calls Queen Victoria "Vicky". The prince's behavior is protocol, he seeks to show that they are close, presenting both obvious and alleged features of Alex's character: "Alex has very strong opinions and he shares them loudly." // "One thing I most admire about Alex is his willingness to admit when he's wrong."

As they become closer, Alex wants to learn everything related to the prince: whether he has a last name, what his relationship with his family members is, what is his favorite movie... Henry calmly answers the questions, even jokingly tries to guess them: "Which other famous boys have I shagged?" But Alex is not really interested in his previous relationships, but in himself. For Henry, such a relationship is not new, as we learn from the conversation with his sister Bea (Ellie Bamber): "Did grandpa find out?" Henry: "Not this time." and from his remark in Paris to the worried and inexperienced Alex: "I went to an English boarding school, dear. Trust me, you're in good hands." He considers their relationship to be his next adventure, he has learned to hide his feelings. Henry knows that everything is temporary, which he correctly warns Alex about from the beginning: "To be clear, this changes nothing between us." (...) "I just can't afford for you to fall in love with me." When Alex directly asks him if the prince could belong to anyone other than Britain, Henry is blunt: "Only momentarily.", which once again categorically emphasizes the short-lived nature of their relationship. Henry rarely asks personal questions, he has no intention of deepening this relationship, his position in society does not allow him to love whoever he wants, although his excitement at Alex's presence is noticeable in his gestures: he ruffles his hair; spins the ring with the seal on his finger (a tick we see often) when he hesitates to invite Alex to a charity polo match; his speech is hurried, because he is not sure that Alex will accept the invitation; sighs when he

leaves him. Viewers are gradually allowed to peek behind the facade of his neutral behavior and discover the sensitive and vulnerable person behind it. Alex does not set limits, he rushes into their relationship, fights for their love with passion, which we see in his other actions – for example, during his work in his mother's presidential campaign.

Each of them sometimes repeats the words of the other, but this is not taken as a pleonastic excess, but has its function in the film. The phrase “I need to get out of here”, spoken playfully by Alex, echoes Henry's explanations for their first meeting, when he refuses to communicate with Alex. The sentence “Just to put it out there.”, duplicating Alex's words puts the two characters in the same position in their confessions of their sexuality, i.e. Henry accepts Alex as an equal in this relationship.

Alex admits his mistakes, which confirms the alleged characterization that Henry gives him in the interview. During their intimate scene in Paris, he says: “I can't believe how wrong I was about you.” Henry is used to people misjudging him: “Most people are.” It's also not a problem for Alex to admit when he doesn't know something – that he hasn't seen the prince's favorite movie, that he doesn't understand the meaning of some of the words, that he has no experience in intimate contact with men: “Who's gonna do what? Because I'm... I've never...”. Henry rarely allows himself not to have an answer, he seems to feel obliged to know everything, he always strives to be right, even when he obviously is not: Alex: “I have no idea what a maypole is... Are they known for their homosexual tendencies?” Henry: “Oh, oh, God, yes. Notorious. Notorious for it.” // Alex: “Swooniest”? Is that even a word?” Henry: Yes, of course it is.”

On the rare occasions when Henry asks questions, he rather seeks answers about his own situation as a person who can never be anonymous. He asks Alex at the New Year's Eve party at the White House: “Do you ever wonder who you'd be if you were... an anonymous person in the world?”, because in his mind, anonymity can give him the freedom to be himself and communicate with the people he wants. He tries to find out if Alex feels the same way: “Is there any part of you that... wishes you weren't the son of the president. Or that your family wasn't in politics?” But for Alex, publicity is an opportunity he wouldn't give up: “To devote your life to helping others? To know that what you do has a meaningful impact on people's lives? ... I know it's my life's work.” Henry tries to understand Alex's position: “I'm learning.” Later, in a conversation with his sister, he compares his role to the one Alex wants for himself, using the same words: “Sometimes... I wonder if what we do has any meaningful impact on people's lives.” Alex strives for publicity, Henry dreams of anonymity. This difference is later referred to by the prince when he tries to explain why their relationship could not be continued: “My life is the crown and your is politics and I will not trade one prison for another.”

For Alex, everything is new and interesting, he does not know how far their relationship will go, but he is a dreamer and optimist. Many things in Henry's life are strange to him, very different from his own experience: that the prince can not cook, that he does not have the right to vote, that he has to hide his sexuality from his family. For Alex, this is incomprehensible, but Henry accepts it as something normal: "It's my life.", "Them's the rules." He doesn't complain, he just patiently explains. Henry's entire behavior is patient: the pace of his speech is moderate, his movements and gestures are restrained, his face is expressionless. He is a resigned pessimist – the complete opposite of Alex's seething energy. But when the two confess their feelings, their positions change: Henry: "Please be patient with me, and I promise I will try and be brave for us. Because when they write the history of my life... I want it to include you... and my love for you." Pronounced in the museum, among the eternal artifacts, these words have a special power. Henry now sees his place in history not as a false image created for the public, but wants to be remembered as a man with a real face and real feelings. Alex: "I love you. I'll be as patient, as you need."

The two entree their relationship with very different life and emotional experiences. Alex matures and develops in his relationship with the prince, he has his fears and hesitations as a public figure, but gains confidence when Henry supports him: Alex: "I'll admit this to you and no one else... I'm secretly afraid I'm going to let my mother down." Henry: "Alex, I understand what you're saying and I believe what you're describing is called "impostor syndrome". But I know that you are not an impostor." From defiant, childish behavior, Alex comes to conscious mature decisions, which is evident both in his firm stance to fight for their relationship and in his speech after its disclosure, in which he publicly announces his feelings for the prince. Henry has never been anonymous, he cannot imagine a life different from the one he lives – always in front of everyone's eyes. The only place where he can hide is the museum: "In here, at night, no one else is around to gawk at you or try and take a picture." The scene is filmed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Henry connects the place with his father, the actor who played James Bond (we know this from the book), who used to bring him there. The film does not mention James Bond, but there are discreet references to the movie character – Henry drives a Jaguar-e-type (one of Bond's cars), at the New Year's Eve party he drinks a martini (Bond's drink).

The clothes worn by the characters in the film also have different messages. Alex dresses informally in his daily life, but when he is with Henry, he tries to fit into his environment and puts on a suit, although he feels uncomfortable in these clothes. Henry is always dressed formally, this is his everyday attire. Sometimes this annoys Alex: "I hate the tie you're wearing in *Vogue*. It's so boring. What do you have against color anyway?" "Gray is color, thank you." – Henry answers, but in his next meeting with Alex, he has already changed the color of his tie. The

prince's clothes are his armor. The colors he adheres to are dark blue, black and gray, in tune with his official position in society, but also with his mood. With Alex, he gradually begins to change the palette. When they visit Alex's parents' house, he wears a white suit, walks barefoot, puts on Alex's clothes – he is happy. Some of his own clothes are starting to resemble those of the president's son – jeans and a light blue t-shirt, very similar to the one Alex wears. With every change in Henry's mood, so do his clothes. After Alex's first attempt to confess his feelings to him, the prince runs away and puts on a blue jacket again – he returns to his duties at the palace. On election night, he wears a tie with yellow roses [46] [47], in support of Alex's efforts in Texas during the campaign.

Alex and Henry's nonverbal behavior gives us a lot of information about the characters and the development of the relationship between the two. At first, they try to keep a great distance from each other, but gradually it decreases – they move from public distance to social, personal, intimate. Their hands are also an indicator of the degree of their closeness. Each of them tries to take control at their first handshake; later their hands are timid and nervous, without touching, but in the same space (the table in the café). “Not here.” – Henry warns when Alex reaches for his hand in front of the bodyguards. They intertwine their fingers – at first only in the intimate scene and publicly at the end of the film.

We see exceptional acting technique and skills for expressing emotions in the eyes of the two characters. Alex's gaze is dynamic at first, it does not stay in one place when he is forced to listen to his mother's reproaches for his unreasonable behavior at the royal wedding. He looks uncertain when he is with Henry at the beginning of their relationship, timid when they become intimate, ashamed when his mother talks to him about the precautions of same-sex contact, hesitantly when she asks Henry to talk to him at the palace, and confidently when he is already aware of his feelings. Henry's gaze at the beginning of the film is like glass, he is expressionless during the royal wedding and at the interview. Even when he smiles, his eyes look indifferently. In the following scenes, his gaze is different: he is empathetic when he talks to the sick child; timidly looks Alex in the eye when he shakes hands with him at parting; he secretly looks at Alex with longing during the New Year's Eve party; with bitterness when the girls kiss the president's son. When Alex surprisingly kisses him in the red room, he first looks at him in amazement, then his gaze becomes mischievous; in a café in Paris, he flirts with his eyes. In the hotel room, he goes through several expressions: timid – when he offers to “make love”, confident – when he calms a worried Alex, delighted – when he admires Alex's body, and then becomes tender and vulnerable. When he finds out that their emails have been published, we see despair in his eyes. When the courtiers discuss the problem, he looks resigned, and when he realizes that Alex is traveling to him – with hope. At the meeting with the king,



when Alex is already next to him, he has made a decision and his gaze is confident.

Important symbols in the film are the key to Alex's mother's house, which he wears on a chain around his neck and Henry's seal ring. At the beginning of their relationship, Henry shares: "You know, I don't... think I've ever owned a key in my entire life." Alex's key hangs between them during the intimate Parisian scene, as if it unlocks their feelings. When the prince later gives Alex his ring as a sign that it no longer belongs to the monarchy, but to him, Alex gives him this key in return – Henry already has a home.

The happy ending of the film is the result of the change of the two characters, but also of the pressure of the crowd that supports them (*deus ex machina*). The last thing viewers see before the credits is of a shooting star above Alex's home in Austin, where the two characters are – dreams come true.

The film retains the daring language of the book, but never crosses the line of good taste. Intimate scenes are presented frankly, but without turning into something dirty and lustful. Viewers understand what is happening between the characters, but they do not see any sexual anatomy. Even in moments of intimacy, the emphasis is not on the physical act, but on the emotional connection between the characters – eye contact, intertwined hands. They are vulnerable, in their intimate moments we see a lot of love, tenderness and care. The emotionality of the contact between the two in the Parisian scene is so intense that the viewer feels like an intruder. The small gestures of love in different scenes emphasize the suggestion of the strength of their feelings: Henry kisses Alex on the shoulder, on the hand; Alex squeezes Henry's hand as they sleep, as if afraid of losing him. The prince smiles slightly and shrugs his shoulders contentedly when he is in Alex's arms... [48] During the delicate scenes, the film relies on euphemisms: linguistic: Stonehenge, Big Ben, the Nelson's Column; visual: the Washington Monument, the Eiffel Tower.

The details in the different scenes complement the situations. During the Parisian scene, a small figure of Cupid [49] is visible above Alex's bare shoulder – the mischievous Roman god of erotic love, but also a clock – their time together is limited. When Henry dives into the lake to prevent Alex from confessing his love to him, underwater he puts his hand on his heart and the audience feels his pain from not being able to afford to accept this love. Alex kisses Henry in front of the portrait of Alexander Hamilton, whose letters the prince quotes in the book. The attention to details is so precise that in the polo scene, Henry rides with a double bridle – only experienced riders can do this, the skills of Nicholas Galitzine deserve superlatives in this scene as well.

The film is also a kind of test of the cultural horizons of the viewer, who sees in the scenes as much as his own cognitive and emotional experience allows. In addition to the pure enjoyment of a good script and wonderful acting, the film

also contains many intellectual challenges (“Easter eggs”) [50], the discovery of which references cultural realities from history, literature, cinema, thus expanding the receptive field of the viewer and turning the adaptation into a hypertext with multiple possibilities for interpretation. When considering the reception problem Matthew López is adamant: “It’s not my movie anymore... it’s belongs to everyone who sees it now.” [51]

The film draws the audience into the quest, and they can choose whether to be merely passive recipients of what is happening on the screen, or to accept the invitation of the director and the actors for a deeper adventure.

We can see a lot of references:

**To political events:** Zahra – the deputy chief of staff for the president (Sarah Shahi) to Henry: “...if anyone sees you leave this hotel, I will Brexit your head from your body.”

**To personalities:** Henry: “Technically, I’m the spare.” [52]; the king to his secretary: “Yes, Tommy [53], what is it?” “Tommy Lascelles was the reluctant courtier who made sure the Royal Family never changed”. [54]

**To movies:** Alex and Nora watch “Some Like It Hot” [55] on TV; in the dance scene of the New Year's Eve party, Alex and Henry look at each other while everyone else disappears for them – a reference to “Pride and Prejudice” [56], “West Side Story” [57]. In the scene where Henry is on the balcony in Kensington and Alex is downstairs asking him to talk, we see elements of “Romeo and Juliet” [58]. A counterpoint to this divided space is their meeting and embracing on the palace staircase.

**To books:** Zahra calls Henry “Little Lord Fuckleroy” – an allusion to the children's book “Little Lord Fauntleroy” [59]. The prince encourages Alex with quotes from Jane Austen's “Sense and Sensibility” [60]: “I’m reminded of one of my favorite quotes from *Sense and Sensibility*. “*It isn’t what we say or think defines us but what we do.*”

**To mythology:** the Cupid statuette in the Parisian scene; David and Johnatan [61] – one of the director's jokes: Henry's dog's name is David, and Alex's bodyguard's dog is called Jonathan.

There are funny verbal puns in the movie. Zahra's speech behavior is built on wordplay with strong expressiveness: Zahra to Alex: “You can hate Prince Henry all you want, but the minute you see a camera, you better act like the sun shines out of his ass and you have a vitamin D deficiency.”; Zahra to Henry: “Not talking to you, sir.” In the same scene, after the rude behavior towards him, she returns to the protocol with a bow: “Your Royal Highness.” The scenes with her participation are fast, as is her speech.

The dynamics of the film change in different scenes – hectic in the comic, slower in the dramatic ones. The rhythm follows the change of a fast scene to a slow one, to a comic one to a dramatic one. In the scene in the red room, the

movements of the characters are hectic like in a silent movie. The polo scene presents fast alternating shots of the game and of the intimate scene between the two characters. The director admits that he borrowed the idea for this scene from Alfred Hitchcock. [62]. Dynamics are also conveyed through the use of the smooth *pre-lap* and *J-cut* transition, when the sound of the next scene is heard before it has started. The soundtrack also creates dynamics, it is a commentary on the events on the screen, but this is not perceived as an annoying duplication, but brings additional expressiveness to the characters and situations – sometimes as a background, as a transition, as a union of several scenes with a similar mood.

The director makes jokes with the audience: the romantic template: Paris – spring – romantic music – love; a shooting star. There is a play on words and situations: during the text messages and phone calls between the two characters, Henry is visualized in Alex's room, appearing and disappearing among a swarm of orange monarch butterflies (the butterflies in the stomachs of lovers). In one of the scenes *closeted prince is in the closet* (*Closeted* and *in the closet* are metaphors for queer people who have not disclosed their sexual orientation). [63] In the role of the homophobic king, we see Stephen Fry – a legend of British cinema, who is openly gay. [64] Some of the jokes are in the bold tone of the book: Alex: “And I thought Alexander Gabriel Claremont-Diaz was a mouthful.” Henry, looking playfully: “He is.”

There is a lot of joy, love and warmth in this film. It is a beautiful modern fairy tale, but along with fun “López takes the Trojan horse approach to raise issues of HIV prevention, consent and personal privacy.” [65] The relationship between the two characters is beautiful, there is no violence in it. Their sexual behavior is responsible – on the bedside tables during intimate scenes we see packages of condoms. The director's position on safe sex is also evident in the scene in which Alex reveals to his mother his relationship with Henry. She supports him, but warns him that such relationships can affect his entire life and draws attention to the need to use precautions, Truvada, and HPV vaccine. This scene is like a model for having difficult conversations between parents and children.

The film is nominated for an Emmy Award for Outstanding Television Movie – 2024 [66], and Casey McQuiston and Matthew Lopez are already writing a script for the sequel.[67]

## Conclusion

The representation of queer characters in the book and in the film is not limited to their sexuality, it is only one of their traits. They are rich personalities with complex souls, diverse interests and broad knowledge. To accept them only in the context of the LGBTQ+ community would be an unfair and one-sided treatment of characters to only one group. They are much more like individuals,

and their relationship is not only on a sexual level. This is a beautiful love story between two people, and here gender does not matter at all.

Along with the positive message to queer people, the book and the film pose many significant issues: about morality in politics and in the media, about social stigma, about blind adherence to traditions in a changing world, about the place of people with different sexual orientation in history, about the role of women and immigrants in positions of power, about the human right to privacy, about true and false values. Included in the book and the film as part of the components that build the characters and situations, these questions, placed in an emotional context, have the power to evoke more empathy and activity than they would achieve with a direct declaration. Fairy tales are universal texts to convey the human experience between generations, but since the experiences of Generation Z are different, they need stories with morals, told with their metaphors. And the book and the film *Red, White & Royal Blue* [68] speak their language.

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**Assoc. Prof., Kalina Yocheva, PhD**, is a lecturer at “Konstantin Preslavsky” University of Shumen. Kalina’s scientific interests are related to pedagogic communication, linguistics, contemporary technology in education, intercultural education, innovative methods of education. The subject of her PhD dissertation is “Adoption of communicative strategies by studying fairy tales“. She has published more than 50 scientific publications in Bulgaria and abroad in the field of intercultural communication and intercultural interaction, communication problems in contemporary education among others, linguistics and Bulgarian language and literature education.

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