

Instagram shelfies and everyday readings of *Heartstopper*

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Abstract: In this chapter I discuss a pragmatic sample of Instagram posts relating to *Heartstopper*, the global hit queer YA graphic novel by Alice Oseman. By examining shelfies, I identify different ways these posts can show everyday reading histories: reading aesthetics where the arrangements display a reading history on visually pleasing principles; tactile reading, where the materiality is centred; assemblages locating *Heartstopper* within a broader reading history; emotional responses which capture something of the way these books made people feel and the how readers felt about reading; those where queer temporalities are made legible; and bibliographically attentive reading, which focuses on reading histories where materiality is privileged. Together, by mobilizing queer theory, a small number of examples show how rich a way these posts can be to access everyday reading.

Keywords: queer bibliography; young adult fiction; affect; temporalities; *Heartstopper*

1. Introduction

Alice Oseman's queer Young Adult graphic novel *Heartstopper* is a love story between two boys at an English grammar school.¹ For the

¹ These are selective possibly fee-paying schools.

uninitiated, it is a long-form web-comic, drawn as 1820 panels so far since 2016 as part of an ongoing project, with five of six projected print volumes published (2018-present) plus several novellas. In 2022 the first *Netflix* live-action series was released, produced under the care of the author, these have played close fidelity to the originals, and bear many syntactic elements of the comics, such as framing and visual effects, as well as what I called elsewhere “Osemanic” designs such as the falling leaves (Noble 2024c). *Heartstopper* occupies a complex transmedia reading landscape to unpack, in common with much of YA literature (Mygind 2023). Undoubtedly there is a need for a generous transmedia reading of *Heartstopper*, because this is how readers have experienced it. It has found an audience in many languages and countries, aided by free access, translations, and *Netflix* dubbing. Yet, however popular the adaptation has been, the books remain central. Millions of print copies have been sold. I am not attempting to historicize *Heartstopper* here, but even a few years ago queer representation in YA literature was very limited indeed (Gillingham 2018). Far beyond simply occupying the mainstream confidently, this is a runaway, global success.

Briefly, the plot is this: Nick and Charlie are seated next to each other for registration at an all-boys grammar school in England: Charlie is bookish gay nerd; Nick is an apparently straight rugby player. Spoiler: he is not that straight. However unlikely, they become friends, kiss and romance follows. The first time they spend together outside school is when it snows and they play in it with Nick’s dog Nellie; he presents a photograph of this as a short-notice birthday present to Charlie. The back cover states: “Boy meets boy. Boys become friends. Boys fall in love.”, offering a concise and unambiguous peritextual plot summary.

2. Queer bibliography

In the last decade, the rise of critical bibliography has been a striking development, challenging the underpinnings of and ways in which we study material texts. It is a slippery idea, given that, as Lisa Maruca and Kate Ozment note, “there is not a settled definition of what the term is or does” (2023, 231). This has not held back the field. A long historical tradition on which it draws is of liberation bibliography (Spires 2022), developing into a healthy field of Black bibliography (Goldsby and McGill 2022). In turn, this has inspired other reappraisals of the field. Feminist bibliography (Ozment 2020) and approaches challenging the settler colonial logics (Cohen 2020; Peiser 2023; Mattes 2023; Wisecup 2025).

More recently, queer bibliography has emerged as an area of shared academic enquiry, mobilizing queer theory in the service of studying material texts, recovering historical and vernacular queer textual practices, and queering the field of study itself (Noble and Pyke 2024). In the 2010s, at least some felt queer theory had run its course, and it was time to develop queer methods which aligned with these theories saw exactly this kind, but the material studies of texts was curiously absent from these discussions (Browne and Nash 2016; Ghaziani and Brim 2019), although these were not concerned with texts, less still material ones.

Two of the things which reading requires are time and manual handling. We must spend time reading, and we must physically handle books, even electronically. It follows that thinking about time and our involuntary reactions to the way things make us feel makes sense. In this chapter, I use two aspects of queer theory to help parse everyday readings of *Heartstopper*: Queer temporalities and affect theory. It is my contention that these ideas have application to non-queer reading, too.

The notion of queer temporalities might mean a rejection of traditional life milestones: as Jodie Taylor notes, “[q]ueer lives often skip over some of the steps of the heteronormative timeline [instead enjoying] a prolonged youthfulness and a lingering within early adulthood,” “placing queers outside many categories of age-appropriate behaviour” (Taylor 2010, 894). An obvious example of this would be the reading of YA literature as former young adults.

There is a temporal quality to reading: it must take time which cannot be avoided, whatever the promise of planet-destroying copyright-infringing LLMs; reading must therefore occur within chronologies. In this sense, notions of queer temporalities can help us understand experience reading where time appears irregular in some way: perhaps time melts away whilst engrossed in a book, or when re-reading something we are transported back to where we first read it. Or, indeed, reading might take place at different stages in the lifecycle. There is an inherent temporality and flow to how books circulate and are read. Robert Darnton’s conceptualization of a “communication circuit” has had an enormous impact on the history of the book, outlining and indeed conceptualizing visually the passage of books in a connected model starting with the author to the publisher, printer, shipper, seller, and reader. Although designed in relation to eighteenth-century France, this notion might be adapted for other purposes, and indeed has been, in great number, to the extent it is hard to imagine book history not involving diagrams charting these flows (1982; 2007). Queer bibliography, simply by embracing the skips, lags, short-circuits, and other temporal distortions in circulation, from writing to reading, adds a dimension to such circuit-based models. Indeed, many queer texts can be seen as physical instantiations of queer temporalities. Consider the late

publication of E. M. Forster's *Maurice* written 1913-14, but only published in 1971 after the author's death a year earlier.

Queer temporalities are to some degree historically contingent, and not just because of the constructed nature of the heterosexist norms against which they push. Halberstam describes how “[q]ueer time perhaps emerges most spectacularly, at the end of the twentieth century, from within those gay communities whose horizons of possibility have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic” (2005, 2). Another event which is more context-specific is the odd lags created by Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988, which prevented Local Authorities in the UK from using funds to “promote homosexuality” (On this legislation see: Freshwater 2009; Baker 2022). This had the broadly chilling effect which its architects intended, and in practical terms made it impossible to supply books like *Heartstopper* in school libraries, and, in reality, making the commercial viability of such titles impossible. This is certainly one factor in explaining why queer adults have turned to queer YA material as it has become available, even if reported reactions to this are more complex. It is important, however, to note that male/male romances find voracious readers – and indeed markets – in straight women (Foster 2015; Whitman-Hess 2022).

3. A pragmatic sample

In *Heartstopper*, Oseman presents bookshelves as a way to display reading histories, making explicit invitation to read Charlie Spring's bookshelf in a drawn shelf in one of the comics showing an eclectic mixture of classic literature and queer YA titles including some of Oseman's own (Oseman 2020a, np). Popups of his bedroom were displayed at Waterstones in Piccadilly London to celebrate the Netflix release. There is a timeliness to this too, in the sense that domestic

shelves became visible during the large number of videoconference calls which came to shape lives after lockdowns due to the covid pandemic after March 2020 (Norrick-Rühl and Towheed 2022). All shelfies are surely staged to a lesser or greater degree, in that some will arrange their shelves or frame their shot to give a certain view, others will privilege ergonomics over aesthetics. Cultural discourse criticised the politics implied by the presence of particular books, terming them “red flag” (King 2022) or otherwise “problematic” (Bullen 2022).

Indeed, just as reading is an emotional activity, so is holding books: they can feel particular and we have an involuntary response to handling them. Affect theory can be applied to the study of material books. For example, I have argued elsewhere that our involuntary, affective reactions to books are valuable and legitimate sources of bibliographical information (Noble 2024a). This however, is most obviously recoverable for the bibliographer at work recording their own. Accessing them for others than our selves is not straightforward, however, some of these shelfies and their accompanying texts provide access to these emotional reactions to books – both materially and the stories they contain. In this sense, shelfies offer access to our emotional experiences of reading.

Platforms such as Instagram are not designed for scholarly research: results returned on queries are typically unstable and therefore irreplicable. This does not, however, mean that they cannot be used in some ways. In this chapter I demonstrate how such posts can be read to understand some reading histories and practices, not to present a representative sample. Instead, I take an assorted sample in response to the search terms “Heartstopper” and “Shelves.” I excluded anyone appearing under 18 and with under 1000 followers, so that we have adults speaking to larger audiences. Whilst these are

public posts, and can, by some accounts, be used legally without further permission, I adapted the strategy used by Beth Driscoll and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, not citing usernames to protect privacy or including weblinks (2019, 250–51). Three responded to provide permission and screenshots are included in these cases. These are illustrative literally and figuratively.

Fundamentally, my task here is to find some of the ways in which some users post about these books and show how these images and accompanying texts can be interpreted as evidence about everyday reading. Using them, I discuss various aspects of visible reading histories: reading aesthetics, extended reading, tactile reading, visible reading histories, emotional reading histories, temporalities, and materialities and reading histories.

4. Reading Shelfies, reading histories

Fundamentally, the Instagram selfie is an aesthetic proposition, in which books and other objects are arranged to achieve a certain look. The “shelfies”, I discuss include some other stagings of books not on shelves, are more than mere aesthetics. We can use these as affective evidence of reading histories, of the emotional decisions, as peritextual discussions of texts beyond the contents in the pages. The arrangement of books in these shots is, first and foremost, aesthetic. I interpret shelfie broadly here, based on the tags mentioned above and included those posts which included *Heartstopper* books.

4.1. Reading aesthetics

The queer semiotics of the rainbow are obvious and taken as an organizing logic both by Oseman and readers. Several posts grouped together titles with pink spines. The spines of the *Heartstopper* books are building toward a pastel rainbow. Many posts successfully do this,

simply placing the titles in sequence. However, for some posters this is quite intentional. Several bookcases and shelves were arranged as rooms. To expand the visual effect, some users supplement the rainbow. One posted showed a shelf of books containing the first four volumes plus *Loveless* to produce a “rainbow shelf”. This is both echoed and disrupted by those achieving their own rainbows across one or more shelves using both *Heartstopper* volumes and other Osemanverse titles, such as *Cherie*, as shown in figure 1, who achieves a rainbow by placing the books out of sequence, aligning the base of their spines, and cropping the right as the comics are larger than the novels (2023).



Figure 1: Oseman, a favourite author, with a serious collection of books and other objects relating to Heartstopper. Reproduced with kind permission.

The rainbow is achieved by expanding to include other Oseman titles, including, *I was Born for This* a YA novel unrelated to *Heartstopper*. Using different colours of hearts matching the covers, a very bare-bones bibliography is presented.

- ♥ This Winter
- ♥ I Was Born For This
- ♥ Heartstopper Vol. 4
- ♥ Nick and Charlie
- ♥ Heartstopper Vol. 3
- ♥ Radio Silence
- ♥ The Heartstopper Yearbook
- ♥ Heartstopper Vol. 2
- ♥ Loveless
- ♥ Solitaire
- ♥ Heartstopper Vol. 1

This expansive approach goes beyond just books. Oseman has not commercialized the comics to the degree other franchises have. Cherie has posted Youtooz figurines of Nick and Charlie sold by Netflix as official adaptation merchandise (2023). I have argued elsewhere that *Heartstopper* candles indicate strength of identification with the books and a desire to extend the story and space (Noble 2024c). Candles appear in many of the posts, both related and unrelated to *Heartstopper*. Candles share a deep affinity with books. Useful props in shelves, they can be deployed to underscore the most important parts – reasonably inferable as the strongest emotional reactions – in these visible reading histories. For whatever reason, candles share a deep affinity with books, and in these shots are deployed as useful props on shelves to underscore the most important parts of a reading history. Many of the posts contained other artworks and objects on display as part of these stagings. With pictures, candles, figures, and a notebook with an illustrated cover, Cherie's is an effective reflection of these, although I would argue it is very pleasingly composed. Such a display, perhaps

akin to a reading shrine, speaks much about how much readers can love their favourite books.

4.2. Tactile reading

As Gillian Silverman notes, “[a]ll touched objects function briefly as prosthetics,” including books, so that “[r]eading usually begins with touch, but accounts of literacy tend to downplay the contact with the text, creating a contradictory experience of the reader” (2020, 191). The experience of reading is tactile, even if by kindle or tablet, the book must be held. The shelfie does not show the act of reading, but they do offer clues. One poster asked if people annotated or appended tabs to their books, with a mug showing highlighter pens and document tabs. Next to it sat a heavily flagged book. At this point it is worth noting these are leisure readers, not lawyers preparing documents for court, or students revising for examinations, or academics reviewing. Reading is thus taken seriously, or at the very least, posters would like it to be thought they are taking it seriously. Other evidence of the tactile quality came from one poster asking others if they own more hardback or paperback books. An aesthetic choice, these are also ergonomic. If we accept that these books are read, and the discussions certainly imply they are, there is a curious challenge, in that all but one spine was posted uncracked. A fairly light touch can be used to read through graphic novels quickly, as discussed below. However, an ethos of care is shown, about how much readers love their books, they take good care. Some show the special protective book sleeves during transport for reading outside the home. The general immaculate condition speaks of a different logic to wanting to show them having been read. An old Alex cartoon strip saw the protagonist tease his colleague Clive for buying a paper *A Brief History of Time*, whereas ‘being the owner of a hardback version

no-one will ever know I haven't read it' (Peattie and Taylor 1995). A different logic is in play here, and it is counterintuitive: the love of these books mean they are protected carefully. These posts, then, hint at specific ways that these users have handled their books whilst reading.

4.3. Visible reading histories

More than anything, the shelfie makes reading histories visible. One poster says they have been reducing the number of shelves in their book-room to contain strictly favourite books only, and noting *Heartstopper* amongst a small number of titles worthy of comment. Their shelves are entirely legible visually, as well as textually through the discussion. By dint of a slight focus adjustment, another poster's books are rendered illegible other than those they wish to highlight. Some shelfies are only *Heartstopper*. Others, show a more mixed diet, such as Chris (2024) (figure 2), posting books he intends to read, including books in translation from Japanese Yoko Tawada, *Scattered all over the Earth* translated by Margaret Mitsutani ([2018] 2023), and Korean, Kyung-Sook Shin, *I went to see my Father*, translated by Anton Hur ([2021] 2023). A German novel by Thorsten Nagelschmidt, *Arbeit: Roman* (2023), about contemporary Berlin nightlife is also pictured. Kimmery Martin's *The Antidote for Everything: a novel* (2020) completes those shown, and in the text supporting the post, some e-reading is discussed. Here, a single post offers a complex view of a rich reading life.

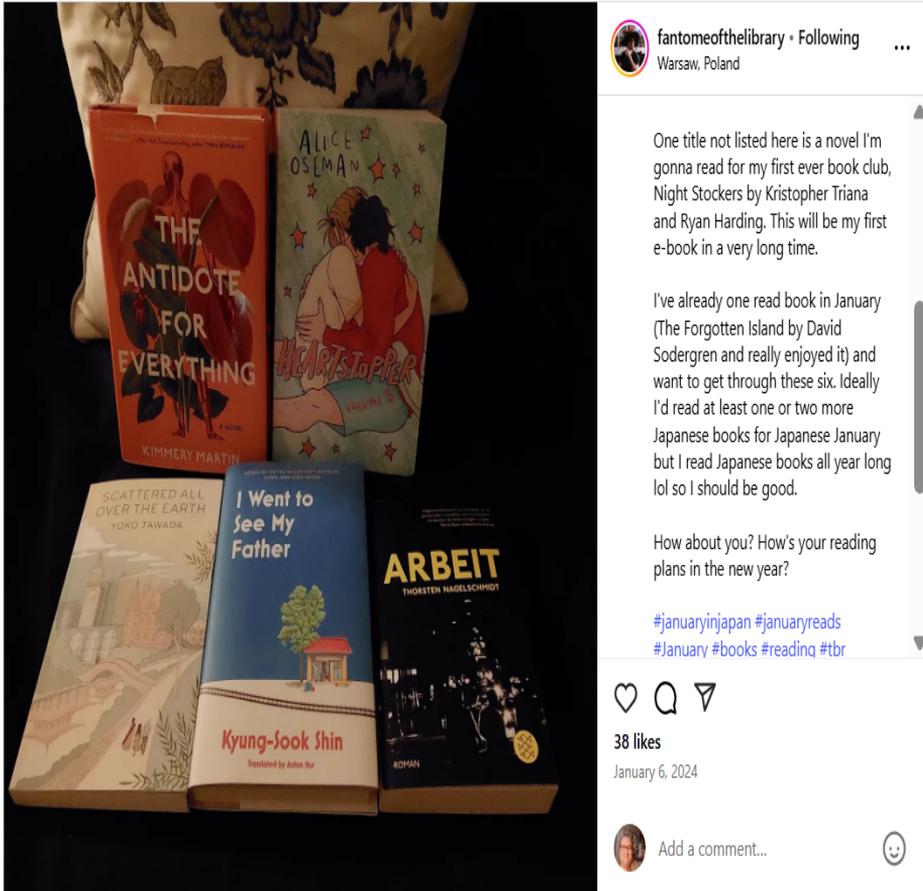


Figure 2: One user, Chris, posts a selection of books he intends to read. Reproduced with kind permission

4.4 Favourites and fluffy season: emotional responses

Many shelfie posts focus on the subject of favourites: thirteen of the posts in the sample used the word, and it was implicit in almost all of them. The notion of favourites, however construed, is significant because it belies a profoundly strong emotional response. *Heartstopper* is often interpreted as charming and sweet by many. Indeed, *Heartstopper* itself, particularly the earliest chapters, revolve

around a happy young love story; as it develops, the dark themes of self-harm, bullying, and eating disorders, emerge, which come out in *Nick and Charlie* and *This Winter* (Oseman 2020b; 2020c; Noble 2024b). For many, *Heartstopper* is simply a favourite. Another wants to read them as part of “fluffy season” as an alternative to spooky season. Almas (2023) offers a fun post likening books to various preparations of coffee. In common with Chris above, invisible reading histories are also a challenge: “[m]any of my reads are ebooks and audiobooks so pose a bit of a problem when I want to take photos of them 😊.” Limiting to books owned physically, Almas offers some answers. Firstly, comes espresso – a strong, short drink translated as “[a] book that was hard to get through,” which was found impossible, despite familiar with the author: “I’ve never had any issue with any other Kristoff book.” The addition of a little foam and steamed milk, a cappuccino, is taken as “[a] book everyone has read but me!” to which “Pride & Prejudice by Jane Austen. Or anything by Jane Austen really!” is offered in reply. In contrast to familiarity with Jay Kristoff’s oeuvre, Almas has not yet gotten round to Austen. A theme of unreading is something to which we will turn next. *Heartstopper* is offered as “[a] sweet read”- noting it as a “series” and that they are “[w]aiting eagerly for the next instalment!” Mochas are “emotional reads”, in this case a collection of love stories by Trent Dalton, and macchiatos are “[a] favourite read”: the *Hobbit* “is a forever fave”. Others are invited to do this challenge, which provides a powerful prompt to interrogate one’s reading history. In particular this an emotional consideration: it offers a direct impression of how reading *felt*, how the book made the reader feel.



Figure 3: a coffee challenge perks up discussion.

For shelfies which do not only include Oseman's titles, some others come up frequently. From the evidence of readers posting favourites, a queer romcom canon emerges, even across a small sample. Casey McQuiston's *Red White and Royal Blue* (2019), about a romantic entanglement between a Prince of Wales and the son of a US president, Aiden Thomas's *Cemetery Boys* (2020) a gay YA ghost story, and Madeline Miller's *Song of Achilles* (2011), a non-YA queer romance which has been enormous hit, queering – or making visible the queer

romance between Patroclus and Achillies during the Trojan War, which has received an enthusiastic queer response, if focused more on adults. A range of special editions are shown in these posts, with sprayed edges and other particular features. Publishers are busy supplying these markets including what Rebecca Romney calls “made collectible” editions (2023). I discuss some *Heartstopper* examples below. The point here is that, together these readers are constructing a shared canon based on feeling, and this is often reflected in how the materiality of the books is arranged in these posts.

4.5. Temporalities

The act of reading of course is evanescent: the moment someone tells you they are reading, they have stopped, however fleetingly. Queer temporalities help explain how queer people experience life courses differently. Time is an element in many of the shelfies in the sample, and their discussion. Some posters have titles supplied as ARCs (advanced reader copies). The giveaway for these in a shelfie is that they typically have the publication date printed at the top of their spines. None of the examples I found were of *Heartstopper*, but the inclusion of these indicates the bookish culture in which posters are participating, and they warrant a little comment here. Typically, these would be positional goods (Hirsch 1976; Tyssedal 2025), because of their scarcity – specifically they cannot be bought. Exceptionally, with *Heartstopper*, the content is already distributed gratis online, so the plot does not risk being spoiled. In a sense Oseman has played with these features of the book trade. Nonetheless, as embargo dates imply, the materiality of these books in effect changes over time. Until that date they are secretive and special, allowing readers to jump ahead in the communication circuit, heralding their proleptic quality at the head of their spines; after the book is published, they become a

curiosity for the collector, and the question of corrections having been made looms, offering the reader the chance to move backward in time.

Readers also post what they intend to read, discussed above. With copies acquired, there is serious intentionality, but it also offers an optimistic futurity. Time allocated to reading can – and perhaps should – feel different. Beyond reading for work, settling down with a book might relate to the luxurious dedication of time to reading for pleasure, or filling time whilst travelling. An absorbing novel sees time disappear, when a glance at the clock shows hours to have passed and then it is 3 o'clock in the morning, at least for nocturnal reader. Graphic novels, by their multimodality, can be read at different speeds. One might revel in each pane of *Heartstopper* as a piece of visual art, as if viewing a volume of engravings, inspect each drop of ink; where learning the plot is the issue, readers may choose to work through a volume very quickly. One reader posted with a note that they had read volume one in 17 minutes. Certainly, a first-time reader will see their impatience rewarded if they demand a similar level of celerity of disclosure of the plot. It may also explain how spines are protected. This remark about speed does not indicate a desire to be finished and one with it, but rather points to a powerful compulsion to learn what happens.

Queer lives might mean celebrating other milestones than those thrust upon all by the heterosexist patriarchy. Marking other moments in the life course can therefore be seen as a radical alternative. As Jodie Taylor has argued, for some queer people, attending musical events can loom larger in their lives, taking the place of more conventional events (2010). We have seen positional goods produced by ARCs. Another poster includes *Heartstopper* in a “Bookstaversary” post, celebrating the anniversary of participating in

bookish Instragram, suggesting – if perhaps wryly – an alternative milestone marker. One user posted about rereading the *Heartstopper Yearbook*, a supplementary text prepared in which characters are explored in ways which it would be hard without disrupting the narrative flow in the graphic novel (Oseman 2022). This user noted that they had read it multiple times, front to back, such was their enthusiasm for it, and because it was found to be so very “cute”. The act of re-reading, of course, erodes temporality. We must also note that enthusiasm for the romance – and the implicit but offstage eroticism in *Heartstopper* reminds us – might be appreciated in different ways. Lucy Neville, for example, has explored the heterosexual female audience for gay male pornography (2018; 2015). Here, the cuteness reports a particular emotional response to the texts.

4.6. Bibliographically attentive reading

Finally, I wish to consider a particular inflexion of the physicality – or materiality – of these titles. Choices made around particular editions will be of particular importance. One user was particularly proud of a set of Fairyloot editions of *Heartstopper* and they feature frequently. Sold on a semi-subscription basis, they are not readily available to purchase in conventional bookstores. Instead, copies are primarily sold to subscribers, although there are occasional surplus sales, and books can be obtained at relatively high prices on the secondary market. These revel in special features such as sprayed edges and decorative end papers. Rebecca Romney dubs this type of production “made collectible”, “[i]ts target audience is mostly young (i.e. averaging in their 20s), mostly female, and significantly less interested in “classics” than in contemporary books that match their own reading taste” (2023). In affective terms it is important to note

that the various features deployed to make these books collectible, make them *feel* special too. Handling the smooth jackets with foil details, which must be removed to see the decorated, foiled hardcovers underneath, makes for a particular experience, and invites owners to pore over the material features in a way they probably do not in standard editions. Slightly heavier, due to the bright white paper on which it is printed, is the crowdfunded edition. One user shows off, perhaps with a certain insouciance, what would be expected to be the real prize for collectors: a copy from the crowdfunded print run in 2018. This is the first edition, only printed in a single run of under 2000, and therefore claims clear bibliographic precedence. Readers, however, have, for now, identified alternative priorities.

Impressionistically, it seems *Heartstopper* readers are willing to accumulate multiple editions of these comics. Anyone buying more than one printed copy occupies a realm concerned with something beyond the ergonomics of reading in print rather than on screen. One user shows four copies of the first volume, centring a Waterstones special hardcover edition, complaining they had found it irresistible in hardback with some additional content. Another shows the first three of the same edition. These posts make clear the bibliographical attentiveness of these readers, not least in display books on bookshelves, text blocks outward, to show off decorated edges.

5. Concluding remarks

Social media postings are rich in potential for those researching books and reading, but require careful handling to look below surface aesthetics. In this paper I have attempted to show how reviewing a small, pragmatic sample of shelfies posted on Instagram involving *Heartstopper* books.

Deploying queer bibliographical lenses, it is possible to discern the scraps of reading histories shared in these posts. They are specifically attuned to the task of amplifying quietest statements and detecting even the subtlest signals. Queer bibliographical methods should not be limited to those studying queer materials. Indeed, these might be deployed in other contexts to help those seeking to recover everyday reading practices.

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