

Boy's Love and Yaoi

Revisited

by [Kat Avila](#)

(Warning: If any frank discussion of sex offends you, please do not read beyond this point.)

Introduction

"No ... too fannish and too weird." — My initial reaction about going to ***Yaoi-Con 2001***

Three years ago, I wrote a brief survey article called *Yaoi Comics: Two Guys in Love and the Female Voyeur*. At the time, one of my informants told me the title was misleading, and now I understand why — because women aren't on the outside looking in ... they're already inside the men. This is a critical point that informs much of what I have to say on the topic of boy's love (BL)/yaoi.

Excluding animation, PC games, and fan fiction from this discussion, BL for me are comics where the emotional and/or physical attraction of the lead male characters to each other is immediately apparent or will eventually develop. Whether they have hot-and-heavy sex or not is irrelevant — things may never get beyond a simple kiss. The range is "hard-core, soft-core, no-core," as a past informant quipped. Hardcore BL comics are analogous to erotic romance novels, not much unlike what you would get if you spliced ***Playgirl Magazine*** with forbidden love master plots. Significant female characters in many BL stories are rare or nonexistent; e.g., in my September 2004 review of You Higuri's historical adventure series

Gorgeous Carat, I pointed out their high mortality rate.

I prefer to use the pan-Asian term "boy's love" over "yaoi." "Yaoi" has an association in Japan with low quality self-published comics, and I save it for BL that are mostly sex scenes (often poorly drawn). However, in the West, the word "yaoi" has become the umbrella term, e.g., **Yaoi-Con**, and is being used commercially. "But [yaoi] does function nicely as a code word," noted an informant who is also not crazy about its commercial use. "Yaoi" is an acronym formed from the Japanese phrases "yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi" ("no climax, no point, no meaning").

"Girls playing with dolls" is how manga critic and **Comiket** co-founder Yoshihiro Yonezawa has described the co-opting of male characters from popular manga and anime in non-original, self-published BL comics. That's not too different from how I think of mainstream BL, which is as a performance, female actors playing fantasy male roles, since BL is primarily created by female writers and artists (the actors) for female consumers (the audience). While this "performance" is staged to entertain, there is also gender role experimentation and, in hardcore BL, familiarization and bonding with the sexualized male body going on at the same time. The sex, if any, reflects heterosexual mores rather than homosexual (which is why BL comics and gay comics are not synonymous). The female virgin's reluctance to have sex before marriage/emotional commitment has been replaced by the bottom and anal virgin's reluctance to do it with another guy. BL stories favor the bottom, the traditional position and viewpoint of the female.

Because I look at BL from a performance perspective, I begin my evolutionary timeline of the genre with the establishment of the popular all-female, five troupe-strong Takarazuka Revue Company, which was founded in 1914 in Takarazuka City, Japan. As I penned in a firsthand article, "When you enter the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater [the lesser of two main performance sites], you walk up a

grand red-carpeted staircase whose banister is adorned with multicolored roses. It's part of the fantasy — princess meeting her prince. *But it's a prince created by another woman.*" All the male roles are played and danced by tall, graceful, and beautifully costumed females. Osamu Tezuka was inspired to write his gender-bending ***Princess Knight*** (princess disguised as a prince) from his early experiences with the Takarazuka Revue (his mother was a fan). The manga is considered the forerunner of Japanese girls' comics.

Subversion of Male-Centered Culture

I previously worried over how I as a proper feminist could enjoy BL when it seems to support keeping women — via its lesser female characters — "in the kitchen," in the background, but then in this world of fantasy the men are controlled and manipulated by female creators, a reverse mirror image of the real patriarchal world. "There's something cute/enjoyable/subversive about seeing these macho basketball jocks/warriors/demons be courted or get pregnant or wear sailor fuku [girls' school uniforms] or watch babies or whatever," as a female informant has previously said about this BL aspect of gender role reversal.

Additionally, while BL demystifies how "gays" have sex and normalizes certain sexual practices to women readers, it also challenges male-centered culture by parodying patriarchy and playing around with it. BL is a double-edged sword for gay males. "Yaoi isn't about 'gay' couples — it's about the idealized relationships with men that women would *like* to have," shared a gay BL reader in past correspondence on the subject.

Banishment to the perimeters of patriarchy gets reprocessed and the diminishment of the female is lessened when appropriated for BL fantasy. A real-life scene of a boardroom emptying of powerful corporate businessmen becomes less threatening as fodder for a BL fantasy — what they were *really* doing behind closed

doors. In straight male-centered comics and anime, female exclusion means more "dolls" to play with, control is hijacked through BL/yaoi fantasy, e.g., watching *Fullmetal Alchemist* was never quite the same after seeing a doujinshi (self-published comic) cover of Edward giving his tin-man brother Alphonse a blow job; the mainstream anime became attached to a BL subtext.

What the Readers Say

I asked two past female informants, who had been very influential in my formative thinking about boy's love/yaoi, if they would revisit the subject and share their thoughts at this milestone in time when three publishers — **Be Beautiful**, **Digital Manga Publishing (DMP)**, and **Kitty Media** — have translated and released hardcore BL into mainstream U.S. bookstores this past year.

Alice: The main *ahem* thrust of most of my opinions about the stuff I've seen translated is "Wow, it seemed *so* much cooler when I didn't know what they were saying, or when I could only get the vague gist through laborious translating." In some cases, we might be able to blame the translator, but in others ... well, much of this manga was never really intended to be High Art, to put it kindly. (And in some, it's a little from column A, a little from column B, see: *Fake*, *Golden Cain*).

Maybe some of my disenchantment is because I'm getting older, too (although I think I'm pretty immature for a gal in my 20s). It seems very obvious to me now that some of these stories are mainly aimed at a teen market and really aren't that different from cookie-cutter teen shoujo romance when you get down to it. Although, that might also be the "jaded fan" symptoms setting in! The first blush has worn off, and now that I know so many Japanese clichés, stories no longer seem as fresh just because they avoid American ones.

Still, I'll buy all but the *really* bad titles, because I know

there are some extremely well-done series out there in Japan; I want to encourage this [U.S.] commercial foray into BL in the hopes that some of the better things will get picked up as well. Also, I'll finally be able to easily enjoy a good plot or dialogue-heavy story, since I won't be reading at the rate of a half-hour per sentence (which I might not get right anyway!). Something like ***Desire*** or ***Only the Ring Finger Knows*** would probably never have caught my eye on the basis of art or story, but each book was a nicely done ringing of the changes, if nothing especially original. Like reading a well-done romance novel (which is what they basically are, after all). I'd never have thought them worth the time to painfully translate on my own, but the translated versions were an okay buy for the \$13.

But, agh, some of the translations ... it's good to have the originals of one's favorite series. Not to say that translation's easy; I have no illusions that it is. So much of Japanese is about context, with things left out that just can't be left out in English, or things implied that can't be implied in English. Not to mention that there are some things where the U.S. and Japan just suffer a near-complete cultural disconnect.

Of course, being a nitpicking fan, I *really* wish honorifics were left in for some of these. I mostly miss it in obviously "Japanese" stories or where it's a continuing joke/characterization point. In something like ***Fake***, [which is] set in NYC, or others set in fantasy-type places, it's not really an issue.

One of the books I have tried to get around this with is ***Mr. So-and-so***, but that really doesn't have the right connotation at all in English. And ***Kizuna***! It's just wrong without Ran-chan and Enjouji [how Ranmaru Samejima, Kei Enjouji refer to one another in the Japanese version]! Changing how the people address each other leaves out a huge piece of characterization (not to mention increasing the potential for Kai [Sagano], Kei confusion). ***Kizuna***, at least, is very obviously set in Japan with things like yakuza

and kendo playing a big part; it's not like it would be completely odd to leave it in. There are pages of notes on Japanese words in the English versions of *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Please Save My Earth* (which I geekily love), but they don't think people buying *Kizuna* — with its "Age 18+" label — can handle this extra dimension? Or maybe they don't think readers want it?

MJJohnson: Until the idea of male-for-women becomes more common, if it ever does, I'd guess that general comic readers will call it as they see it — two guys automatically equals gay. The term gets bandied about even by fans when discussing whether characters are ummm ... we need a verb from yaoi parallel to "slashable": "I don't think So-and-so is gay at all, you *can't* pair him with X" (which misses the whole point of yaoi as practiced in Japan, but seems to be a great concern of yaoi as practiced here.)

Also, how many of these general comic reviewers are guys? To guy fans, how can m/m *not* be gay? Even gay guys have problems with the notion that whatever it looks like it's not about them; and from a western P.O.V. the idea gets into edgy territory. Basically what BL says is, "This isn't about real gay men. I'm just using men in a sexual relationship as a fantasy that has nothing to do with reality." Compare with, "This isn't about real black people. I'm just using people with very dark skin as a fantasy that has nothing to do with reality." It makes perfect sense from our P.O.V. or indeed the Japanese P.O.V. — they aren't *real* gay men or blacks, they're something that kinda looks like them but acts totally different. But from a mainstream P.O.V. — yeah. Difficult. "Since when did we get to be grist for your fantasies?" Of course, women can come back with, "We've *always* been material for your fantasies, so suck it up now," but that's not exactly good marketing.

A close parallel is with "lesbian" porn aimed at straight men, but that gets into another area of conflict, as to precisely how pornographic BL is. Most of it isn't in Japan,

but again guys over here want to insist that yaoi is porn for women. Call it emotional porn, like romance novels, and I'll agree, but that's not what they mean. But actually BL is basically romance novels with two male characters, not one, and after that the numbers break down as expected. Most is romance with a happy ending after vicissitudes, some is darker and has "dangerous" overtones, and a smallish proportion has very explicit sex for those that like it. But the sex by and large is still of the organless variety. You see the guys in position, but you don't see them doing anything.

I think the misconceptions won't go away until a much broader range of BL is available and people can see what mindless fluff 95% of it is. Fortunately, it looks like there's enough fluff coming out as opposed to hardcore to get the message across. I'll be very interested to see how it sells. BL *is* a repetitive and mindless genre, very like romance novels. Maybe it will press the same buttons as the novels do, or maybe people will say, "Is that all there is? Sheesh."

What the Publishers Say

Tart Chat with Be Beautiful

Masumi Homma O'Donnell is the Vice President of **Be Beautiful**. Under the **Be Beautiful** imprint, they have released Kazuma Kodaka's *Kizuna*, You Asagiri's *Golden Chain*, and Naduki Koujima's *Selfish Love*.

Sequential Tart: *Where do the nicely designed logos for Be Beautiful come from? What do the kanji characters signify?*

Masumi Homma O'Donnell: The ideogram in the **Be Beautiful** logo is pronounced as [the English word] "be" in Japanese. It means "beauty" or "aestheticism." As **Be Beautiful** books focus on the depiction of impossibly beautiful men, we thought it would be appropriate to use this particular character for our logo. Our logo accentuates our slogan, which is "By women, for women; So beautiful,

so perfect."

ST: ***Kizuna** is a highly recognizable title among boy's love/yaoi fans, especially since there exists related animation videos. It was smart marketing to break out with something familiar. How did you decide which titles you would introduce first?*

MO: Our first set of titles were chosen through a rigorous review process by the internal staff. Most of the **Be Beautiful** staff are yaoi fans themselves, so this was not too difficult. In addition, we received many recommendations by fans of yaoi at **Yaoi-Con 2003**, as well as from other sources. Our 2004 releases are the culmination of these various efforts.

As for our future selections, we are always looking for suggestions from our fans. While we constantly receive e-mails from fans suggesting various yaoi titles, the best way to get your voice heard is by participating in our Demographics Survey (www.bebeautifulmanga.com/survey). We review the results of this survey on a regular basis, so you can be assured that your voice will be heard and considered seriously.

ST: *You will be introducing Ayano Yamane's **Target in the Finder** in 2005. It is a beautifully drawn comic with superb artwork and an engaging adult storyline. How did you get her?*

MO: We called the publisher. ^ _ ^

Tart Chat with Digital Manga Publishing (DMP)

Isaac S. Lew is the Director of Sales & New Business Development for **Digital Manga, Inc. Digital Manga Publishing (DMP)** has released Satoru Kannagi and Hotaru Odagiri's **Only the Ring Finger Knows**, Maki Kazumi and Yukine Honami's **Desire**, and Shinobu Gotoh

and Shoko Takaku's *Passion*.

Sequential Tart: *What factored into DMP's decision to enter the U.S. boy's love/yaoi market?*

Isaac S. Lew: In Japan, yaoi has been around for over 15 years. We had listened to the cultural convergence of the times and decided yaoi was what was next. Not to mention the elements of angst, twists, fluff, and overall strong stories are what intrigued us so much.

ST: *DMP's graphic novels are larger (6" x 8-1/4") than the standard size (5" x 7-1/2"). Is there a specific reason why?*

IL: Definitely. We wanted to give the buyer a sense of more value for their buck. Dust cover, enlarged printing, it's all there.

ST: *What titles can we look forward to seeing in 2005?*

IL: Keep an eye out for several entertaining titles this year, Makoto Tateno's *Yellow* being one of our premiere titles. In 2005, **DMP** will be the premiere publisher of yaoi.

Final Thoughts

Hopefully, translated publications will receive enough support so that we may start seeing the beautiful boy material of higher-end artists and writers in the market. In the future, I would like to be able to write about the development and production of our own domestic artists in this area.



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