

What a Wonderful World:

Notes on the Evolution of GLBTQ Literature for Young Adults

In his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, T. S. Eliot offered three “permanent” reasons for reading: (1) the acquisition of wisdom, (2) the enjoyment of art, and (3) the pleasure of entertainment.

When the reading in question is that of young adult literature—the quintessential literature of the outsider—I would suggest there is a fourth reason: the lifesaving necessity of seeing one’s own face reflected in the pages of a good book and the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone.

And yet one group of teenage outsiders—GLBTQ youth (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning)—continues to be too nearly invisible. Since the 1969 publication of John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (Harper & Row), the first young adult novel to deal with the issue of homosexuality, no more than 150 other titles¹ have followed, a woefully inadequate average of four to five per year to give faces to millions of teens (the precise number of GLBTQ teens at any given time is, of course, unknown).

As we will see, this situation is gradually beginning to change for the better, but to look first at the context of literary history, the homosexual as a character in American fiction (for both young adults AND adults) has been a largely absent figure.

Why? In part, because homosexuality was traditionally regarded, in Lord Alfred Douglas’s words, as “the Love that dare not speak its name.” And so, as cultural historian Charles Kaiser has noted, homosexuality did not become a public issue in American life until 1948 when the Kinsey Report on human sexuality was published. Earlier in that decade, however,

World War II had brought together “the largest concentration of gay men ever found inside a single American institution. Volunteer women who joined the WAC and the WAVES experienced an even more prevalent lesbian culture” (78).

It did not take long for art to catch up to what Martin Duberman calls this “critical mass of consciousness” (76). Only three years after the end of the war, two important adult novels with gay themes appeared: *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by Truman Capote and *The City and the Pillar* by Gore Vidal. They are significant for two reasons. First, they were works of serious fiction by writers who would become vital forces in American literature. Second, they were issued by mainstream publishers—Random House and E. P. Dutton, respectively. Previously, as Joseph Cady argues, while there was “frank and affirmative gay male American writing from the century’s start” (most of it now forgotten except by literary historians), it was either published abroad or issued in this country by marginal publishers” (30). The same can arguably be said of lesbian literature; indeed, such writers as H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Natalie Barney were not only published abroad, but they also lived abroad as expatriates.

The new homosexual consciousness that appeared during and after World War II coincided with the first stirrings of what has come to be called young adult (YA) literature. Two of its best-known early practitioners, Maureen Daly and Madeleine L’Engle, published their first novels in the 1940s. Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* appeared in 1942, while L’Engle’s *The Small Rain* was published in 1945. Both titles were pub-

lished as adult novels, and as Christine Jenkins notes in her illuminating article “From Queer to Gay and Back Again” (Library Quarterly 68 [July 1998] 298-334), both also featured incidental treatments of homosexuality.

In *The Small Rain* a gay bar is used as a setting, while in *Seventeenth Summer*, the protagonist, Angie, and her boyfriend, Jack, go to a club to hear a musician who is portrayed as stereotypically gay: “With his eyes still closed, the colored man leaned back on the bench, way back, one hand limp at his side . . . ‘Look, Jack,’ I remember saying, ‘He has red nail polish on! Isn’t that funny—for a man?’” (193-195)

Jenkins further notes that in J. D. Salinger’s 1951 novel *Catcher in the Rye*, another brief homosexual encounter is reported. Like *Seventeenth Summer* and *The Small Rain*, this book was also published for adults but was claimed by succeeding generations of young adults as their own. In this title the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, has a—to him—disturbing encounter with a favorite teacher when he stays overnight at the man’s apartment:

What he (the teacher) was doing was, he was sitting on the floor right next to the couch, in the dark and all, and he was sort of petting me or patting me on the goddam head. Boy, I’ll bet I jumped about a thousand feet. “What the hellyya *doing*?” I said. “Nothing! I’m simply sitting here admiring”—“What’re ya *doing*, anyway?” I said over again. I didn’t know *what* the hell to say—I mean I was embarrassed as hell. “How ‘bout keeping your voice down? I’m simply sitting here—”

“I have to go, anyway,” I said—boy, was I nervous! I know more damn perverts at schools and all, than anybody you ever met, and they’re always being pervery when I’m around.” (192)

These are small moments having little lasting impact on the evolution of gay and lesbian literature published specifically for young adults; nevertheless, for their many YA readers the incidents/settings of these three novels may well have been their first exposure to homosexuality in literature.

A more important treatment of this theme, in the context of a coming-of-age novel, was James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Published in 1953, it dealt authentically with its fourteen-year-old protagonist’s attraction to a seventeen-year-old boy. Then, in 1960, John Knowles’s *A Separate Peace* was published. Like the Daly, L’Engle, Salinger, and

Baldwin titles, this novel was aimed at an adult readership but quickly become a YA classic. Though the book did not overtly deal with homosexuality, to sophisticated readers it clearly had a gay subtext. And in a 1972 interview Knowles acknowledged that his main characters, Finny and Gene, “were in love” (Cady 37)

It would be another nine years, however, before the first young adult novel to deal with homosexuality would be published: as previously noted, it would be *I’ll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan. There is no cause-and-effect relationship between the publication of this book and the historic Stonewall Riots happening in the same watershed year, but it is possible that both were products of the same social/cultural climate. The 1960s, after all, were years of turbulent change, of political unrest, and of sexual revolution.

The media—always the first to observe changes in popular culture—took note, and according to Martin Duberman, “the years 1962 to 1965 saw a sharp increase in the amount of public discussion and representation of homosexuality” (97).

There was a similar increase in the publication, for adult readers, of gay and lesbian novels, including James Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1962), Mary McCarthy’s *The Group* (1963), John Rechy’s *City of Night* (1963) and *Numbers* (1967), Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* (1964) Sanford Friedman’s *Totempole* (1965), and Gore Vidal’s *Myra Breckenridge* (1968).

Meanwhile, in the field of young adult literature the decade of the ’60s saw the emergence of heterosexual sex as a theme for the first time (with the anomalous exception of Henry Gregor Felsen’s *Two and the Town*, which, published in 1952, had dealt with an unmarried teen’s pregnancy). In 1966, for example, Jeannette Eyerly’s *A Girl Like Me* was published; in it an unwed teenage friend of the protagonist becomes pregnant; in 1967 it is the protagonist herself, the eponymous heroine of Zoa Sherburne’s *Too Bad about the Haines Girl*, who becomes pregnant. The same year saw the publication of Ann Head’s adult novel, *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*, in which two teenagers, July and Bo Jo, are swept away by passion; July becomes pregnant, and they elope. This novel appeared in paperback the following year and became a best-seller through teenage book clubs.

Despite the increasing treatment of teenage sexuality in fiction and the increasingly open discussion of homosexuality in American culture, Harper & Row viewed the impending publication of *I'll Get There* with considerable trepidation. The late William C. Morris, a Harper vice president, recalled, "Everyone was very frightened. In fact, we went to such great

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lengths to make it 'acceptable' to the general public that the book got more attention for the fuss we made than for anything that was in it" (Ford 24).

One of the "lengths" was the solicitation of a statement for the dust jacket from the acclaimed Dr. Frances Ilg, director of the Gesell Institute of Child Development.

In a letter dated August 8, 1968, Ursula Nordstrom, director of Harper's Department of Books for Boys and Girls, wrote, "If you like the book as a whole, we would be so glad if you could give us a quote we could use. It seems strange that a curtain has been drawn over this entire subject in fiction for young readers" (Marcus, 261-262).

Dr. Ilg complied with words of praise, the book

was published, and despite Harper's pre-publication anxiety, it received almost universal praise. Indeed, both the *New York Times* and *School Library Journal* named it to their respective annual best books lists.

If that is the proverbial good news, the bad news is that, in this book, Donovan established a less than salutary model for the homosexual novel that would be faithfully replicated for the next dozen years: homosexuality is presented as both a rite of passage experience with no long-term consequences and as a matter of choice. Worse, though, is the equation Donovan makes between homosexuality and death:

his protagonist Davy's beloved dog is killed by a car, an act the boy views as a kind of cosmic punishment for his having kissed and "fooled around with" another boy.

Donovan was not alone in conveying these attitudes, however. For what Joseph Cady writes of the emerging literature of homosexuality published for adults between the end of World War II and 1969 can be equally well applied to the literature for young adults that appeared through the decade of the 1970s: "In their association of homosexuality with violence, suicide, murder or other kinds of pathetic death or at best with lives of freakishness or isolation, many works in the post-World War II outpouring of published gay male writing seem to confirm Mart Crowley's famous line in *The Boys in the Band*, 'Show me a happy homosexual and I'll show you a gay corpse'" (38-39).

Indeed, in the eight young adult novels that would appear in the next decade, death figures in three (*The Man Without a Face*, *Trying Hard To Hear You*, and *Sticks and Stones*) and a violent rape, in a fourth (*Happy Endings Are All Alike*). In the others homosexuality is presented as a passing phase, and the affected characters are vastly relieved to realize, at book's end, that they are "normal" and just like everyone else. Only one novel—*I'll Love You When You're More Like Me* (Harper & Row, 1977)—by the pioneering M. E. Kerr dared to feature a happy, well-adjusted gay character, Charlie Gilhooley. Though he is not the protagonist (that would be his best friend, the heterosexual Wally), Charlie is the more memorable character. Even more importantly, the tone of Kerr's novel is also innovative. It was the first to invest homosexuality with humor. All of the novels before it—and too many after—were unrelievedly turgid and lugubrious.

Two other important "firsts" of the 1970s need to be mentioned: in 1976 Rosa Guy's *Ruby* (Viking) became the first novel to include both an arguably lesbian character (she would choose to be heterosexual by the novel's end) and also the first to feature black characters. Incredibly, fifteen years would pass before other African Americans would appear—in Jacqueline Woodson's *The Dear One* (Delacorte 1991). And not until 1995 would a Latino character appear, in R. J. Hamilton's *Who Framed Lorenzo Garcia?* (Alyson). In fact, the continuing lack of diversity

remains one of the most significant deficiencies in GLBTQ fiction.

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In this context the British writer Aidan Chambers’s novel *Dance on My Grave*, published in this country in 1982, becomes enormously important as the first literary novel to explore the lives of multidimensional gay characters who are presented subtly and in the framework of a structurally experimental work of fiction.

Chambers was the first English writer, who dealt with homosexuality, to be published in the United States. But another English writer, David Rees, had dealt with the subject in his 1979 novel *In the Tent* (Dobson); however, this book did not appear in an American edition until 1985 (Alyson).

A third English writer to deal with homosexuality, Jean Ure, made her first American appearance in her novel *You Win Some. You Lose Some* (Dell 1984).

The value of these books from abroad resides, in part, in their dramatic demonstration that the challenges confronting homosexual teenagers is startlingly similar the world over, a point that has since been reinforced in books from Australia (Kate Walker, Sue Hines) New Zealand (Paula Boock, William Taylor), and Canada (Diana Wieler).

Interestingly, though, only one book—*Damned Strong Love* by Lutz Van Dijk (Holt 1995)—has appeared in the United States in translation. The book was first published in Germany in 1991 and is the true story of a Dutch boy who fell in love with a German soldier during World War II.

In that same watershed year of 1982 another tremendously important novel appeared: Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* (Farrar Straus & Giroux), a novel that has assumed the stature of a classic

because it was the first to recognize that homosexuality embraces not only sex but also love. Even more significantly, the teenage lovers, Liza and Annie, remain together at the novel’s end, despite the myriad difficulties society places in the way of their relationship.

Two other “firsts” that would become conventions of the GLBTQ novel also appeared in the 1980s. In the first year of the decade, Norma Klein’s *Breaking Up* (Random House 1980) became the first title to feature a gay parent, and a year later, Gary Bargar’s novel *What Happened to Mr. Forster?* (Clarion 1981) became the first to feature a gay (and typically self-sacrificing) teacher.

In 1986 M. E. Kerr’s *Night Kites* (Harper & Row) became the first young adult novel to tackle the troubling issue of AIDS—five years after the plague made its first appearance. Though this disease would spark a major subgenre in adult publishing, only a handful of YA titles dealing with the subject would appear and only two of these—Ron Koertge’s droll *The Arizona Kid* (Joy Street/Little, Brown 1988) and Theresa Nelson’s heartfelt *Earthshine* (Orchard Books, 1994)—were of lasting literary significance. Since the mid-’90s the subject has all but vanished from young adult literature though the disease, sadly, continues to have a major impact on adolescent lives.

The decade of the ’80s concluded with the publication of two other novels of enduring significance. A. M. Homes’ *Jack* (Macmillan 1989) remains one of the best treatments of a teenager’s confronting and dealing with a parent’s homosexuality, while Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* (HarperCollins) is not only a classic of gay fiction but also one of the most memorable of all young adult novels. In its large-hearted embrace of every aspect of the workings of the human heart, it demonstrates, with art and innovation, that love is love, regardless of what society chooses to label it. Block has also dealt with homosexuality in a number of her later novels, perhaps most memorably in *Baby Bebo*, the 1995 prequel to *Weetzie Bat* (HarperCollins).

The pace of GLBTQ publishing quickened in the 1980s when a total of forty-one titles were published (compared with eight in the 1970s). In terms of annual production, the numbers ranged from a low of one in 1985 to a high of six in 1981, 1986, and 1989.

The decade of the ’90s was even more productive

in terms of titles published (sixty-eight), peaking in 1997 when a total of twelve titles appeared. It should be remembered, however, that many of these novels dealt with homosexuality only tangentially (e.g., homosexuals are minor characters as in Francesca Lia Block's *Missing Angel Juan* [HarperCollins 1993], Gary Paulsen's *The Car* [Harcourt Brace 1994], Chris Crutcher's *Ironman* [Greenwillow 1995], Adele Griffin's *Split Just Right* [Hyperion, 1997], etc.) or failed to break new ground in terms of theme, offering, instead, endless variations on questioning one's sexual identity and the agonies of coming out.

Several titles stand out, however: in 1994 the first collection of original short stories dealing with GLBTQ issues, *Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence* (HarperCollins), edited by Marion Dane Bauer, appeared. Three years earlier Chris Crutcher created a classic character in one of the stories in his collection *Athletic Shorts* (Greenwillow 1991). The eponymous Angus Bethune in "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune" is not only a brilliantly memorable character but also is the first teen in GLBTQ literature to have not one but two gay parents! Other collections featuring GLBTQ stories included Francesca Lia Block's *Girl Goddess #9* (HarperCollins 1996) and, in the next decade, my own anthologies *Love and Sex* (Simon & Schuster 2001) and *Necessary Noise* (Cotler/HarperCollins 2003).

Other significant titles from the '90s are M. E. Kerr's *Deliver Us from Evie* (HarperCollins 1994), a lesbian love story that addresses gay stereotypes with wit and insight; Jacqueline Woodson's *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Scholastic 1995), the affecting story of an African American boy's attempts to come to terms with his mother's homosexuality and her love affair with a white woman; Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* (Cotler/HarperCollins 1997), a collection of brilliantly reimagined fairy tales told in a lesbian context; and Nancy Garden's *The Year They Burned the Books* (Farrar Straus & Giroux 1999), which not only examines censorship issues but also explores the issue of community and friendship between gay and lesbian characters, something that has been too absent from GLBTQ fiction.

Earlier, in 1997, M. E. Kerr once again introduced a new topic into the field when, in "Hello," *I Lied*

(HarperCollins), she became the first to deal with the complex issue of bisexuality.

Two years later, in 1999, Catherine Atkins's *When Jeff Comes Home* (Harcourt) became arguably the first GLBTQ novel to address the issue of sexual abuse, a subject that would be revisited in Kathleen Jeffrie Johnson's *Target* (Roaring Brook 2003). Unfortunately—and surely, inadvertently—both of these books, in their too muddled treatment of the subject, seem to reinforce the allegations of homophobes that adult gays are, by definition, sexual predators.

On a more salutary note, the decade of the '90s concluded with the publication of two of the most significant titles in all the GLBTQ canon: Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (MTV/Pocket 1999) and Ellen Wittlinger's *Hard Love* (Simon & Schuster 1999).

The latter received a Printz Honor Award as one of the most distinguished young adult novels of the year ("distinguished" being evaluated solely in literary terms). Like Aidan Chambers's *Dance on My Grave*, this title is distinguished by its experimental form (it is told using a variety of different narrative devices, including poetry, letters, articles, and excerpts from zines) and by its emotionally sensitive story of an alienated straight teenage boy named John who falls in love with Marisol, a self-proclaimed "Puerto Rican Cuban Yankee Lesbian."

Perks might also have been honored by the Printz committee were it not for the fact that it was technically published as an adult novel, even though it is a quintessential YA title, a kind of *Catcher in the Rye* for contemporary teenagers. An epistolary novel, it is the haunting story of an emotionally damaged ninth-grade boy named Charlie who discovers that his best friend, Patrick, is gay and is no more bothered by that discovery than was Weetzie Bat when she learned the affectional truth about her friend, Dirk. This casual air of acceptance remains all too rare in GLBTQ fiction, where considerations of sexual identity still seem to trigger convulsions of weeping, wailing, and noisy gnashing of teeth. And, even in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the terrors and heartbreaks of coming out remain major subjects in GLBTQ fiction.

Another, related point might be made here: publishers, in an effort to expand the market for young adult titles, began in the late 1990s to issue and

market as adult books an increasingly large number of what are clearly YA titles. Aside from *Perks*, other examples include Brian Malloy's *The Year of Ice* (St. Martin's Press, 2002) and Bart Yates's *Leave Myself Behind* (Kensington 2003).

It is still too early to say what other trends will enrich and inform—or challenge—the field of GLBTQ fiction in the new century, though the sheer number of books that are being published is slightly greater than in the past. Following a slow start—only five titles appeared in 2000—the pace quickened, with eight titles appearing in 2001 and twelve in 2003 (on the other hand, 2002 was a slow year with only four titles).

More significantly 2003 has seen the first novel to feature a transgender character: *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters (Little, Brown), though some might argue that the titular character Lani Garver in Carol Plum-Ucci's melodramatic *What Happened to Lani Garver* (Harcourt 2002) might be perceived as transgender. The point should be made here—as Peters does in *Luna*—that transgendered persons are not necessarily homosexual, but given the enormous confusion surrounding their sexuality, they have arbitrarily been placed in the same category as gay, lesbians, bisexuals, and questioning teens.

Of greatest significance, however, is the increasing literary quality of GLBTQ fiction as evidenced by the fact that in 2003 a Printz Honor Award went to Garret Freymann-Weyr's novel of love and sexual identity, *My Heartbeat* (Houghton Mifflin 2002), and the Printz Award itself went to Aidan Chambers's *Postcards from No Man's Land* (Dutton 2002), which features the bisexuality of its protagonist as a major subplot.

And further evidencing the increasing acceptance of GLBTQ literature is Nancy Garden's having received the 2003 Margaret A. Edwards Award, presented annually by ALA's Young Adult Library Services Association for lifetime achievement in young adult literature.

As young Americans have become increasingly sophisticated in their knowledge of the world around them in this still new century, a few courageous authors have begun writing books about GLBTQ issues for readers in upper elementary school. Two examples are Nancy Garden's *Holly's Secret* (Farrar Straus & Giroux 2000) and James Howe's *The Misfits* (Atheneum 2001).

Meanwhile, a gratifyingly large number of brilliantly gifted young writers have begun to publish, writers like Garret Freymann-Weyr (mentioned above), Sara Ryan (*Empress of the World*, Viking, 2001), Alex Sanchez (*Rainbow Boys*, Simon & Schuster, 2001, and *Rainbow High*, Simon & Schuster, 2003), Brent Hartinger (*Geography Club*, HarperCollins, 2003), Julie Anne Peters (*Keeping You a Secret*, Little Brown, 2003), Lauren Myracle (*Kissing Kate*, Dutton, 2003), and Tea Benduhn (*Gravel Queen*, Simon & Schuster, 2003), among others.

One of the most gifted of the new generation of writers is David Levithan, whose novel *Boy Meets Boy* (Knopf, 2003) is—as I noted in my starred *Booklist* review—“arguably the most important gay novel since *Annie on My Mind*.” (Cart, 2003, 1980). It is the first “feel good” gay novel for young adults (in the same way that Stephen McCauley's adult novels might be called “feel good” fiction). By that I do not mean to diminish the emotional integrity—or the literary quality—of these novels. But what is revolutionary about them—especially Levithan's—is their blithe acceptance of the condition of being gay. By turns wacky and charming, *Boy Meets Boy* is always original and its characters are fresh, authentic, and deeply engaging—all right, *lovable*. Aspects of the novel are purposely fantastic—Paul, the protagonist has known he was gay since kindergarten; the prom queen at his high school is the cross-dressing quarterback of the football team; two boys walk through town holding hands “and if anybody notices, nobody cares”—but the world it posits is a near revolution in social attitudes, and the book is an amazing step forward in the publishing of GLBTQ fiction. It is the only novel since the genre began in 1969 that has no hint of self-hatred and can believably conclude with a gay protagonist's looking about himself and thinking, “What a wonderful world” (185).

Those who believe that young adult fiction should give faces to all teens of all sexual identities and persuasions can find hope in the thread of acceptance that runs through GLBTQ novels from *Annie on My Mind* through *Weetzie Bat* and *Hard Love* to *Boy Meets Boy* and in the recent expansion of the GLBTQ field to embrace new forms. For example, Levithan, who is an editor as well as an author, recently published a gay memoir in verse: Billy Merrell's *Talking in the Dark: A*

Poetry Memoir (Push/Scholastic 2003) and for the last several years, homosexuality as a theme has begun to appear in the creative form now known as “the graphic novel.” Examples include Judd Winick’s *Pedro and Me* (Holt 2000), Howard Cruse’s *Stuck Rubber Baby* (Paradox Press 1995), and Ron Zimmerman’s *Rawhide Kid* (Marvel 2003).

These increasing numbers and varieties of opportunities, now being given to teens of every sexual identity, to see their faces in the pages of good fiction and, in the process, to find the comfort and reassurance of knowing they are not alone suggests that the day may be coming when the words “what a wonderful world” will no longer carry any hint of irony.

What a wonderful thought.

¹ This number comes from annual lists maintained by Prof. Christine Jenkins, author Nancy Garden, and myself.

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