

Connecting LGBTQ to Others through Problem Novels:

When a LGBTQ Is NOT the Main Character

Our classrooms contain gay students whether we teach at the elementary or the college level or somewhere in-between. Students who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning are seated in those desks in front of us right next to students who do not. The presence of prejudice, overt or not, exists in a myriad of forms. The snickers, the catcalls, the tripping, the whistles, and the ubiquitous use of “faggot,” “queen,” “queer,” dyke,” and “fairy” as epithets occur on a frequent basis.

In *Voices of Diversity* (2006), Langer de Ramirez cites the following statistics supplied by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network in 2004:

- 81.8% of youth reported hearing homophobic remarks such as “faggot” or “That’s so gay” frequently from other students.
- 75.1% of youth who reported feeling unsafe at school claimed that these feelings were due to either their sexual orientation or how they express their gender.
- 23.9% of youth reported frequent verbal harassment in school.
- 22.4% of youth reported sometimes, often or frequently suffering physical harassment (being pushed, shoved, etc.) in school due to their sexual orientation.

- 16.9% of youth reported some incident of physical assault (being punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) in the past year due to their sexual orientation.
- 57.9% of youth reported that they had personal property damaged or stolen in the past school year (85).

In addition, Taylor (2000) reports that homelessness is a problem for gay and lesbian youth: “As many as 30 percent to 40 percent of all runaways and homeless adolescents may be gay or lesbian” (223).

Yet, talking opening about homosexuality in schools may be the one area of diversity still unaddressed. If the statistics listed above don’t give us a

reason, what will? Why is this issue still ignored? Uribe (1994) eloquently reminds us:

Despite the educational establishment’s interest in the health and well being of its youth, issues of teen homosexuality have not been confronted. Thus, the youngest and most vulnerable members of the gay and lesbian community enter puberty and our schools at their own peril (169).

Uribe also asserts the wide acceptance of the belief that at least one in every ten in society is homosexual; in fact, this figure has remained consistent over the years. Thus, the issue for educators

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becomes paramount. How can we bridge the gulf that exists between the estimated 10% of our students and the other 90% who could be instigating and/or perpetrating the harassment indicated above?

If our students are therefore not as accepting of LGBTQ classmates as they are of other diversities, what is our obligation to these students? Daniel (2007) reminds us that adolescence is a tumultuous time as teens face, among other emotional and physical changes, their developing sexual awareness. For all of them, it is a confusing time, but for gay and lesbian youth, it can be frightening as well. They are two to six times more likely to attempt suicide and could be the reason for 30% of all successful teen suicides (75).

What can we do to help these teens feel safer and more secure? Daniel, in her article in *English Journal*, "Invitation to All: Welcoming Gays and Lesbians into My Classroom and Curriculum" cited above, offers several resources and strategies for communicating an openness and acceptance for all students. She includes suggestions for the classroom, for the use of literature, and for the outside community to help teachers establish themselves as "visible" allies "to all students, including students who are gay and lesbian" (76-77). Included is an annotated bibliography of contemporary young adult literature where homosexual youth can find themselves as the main character. All students ought to be able to find books that reflect who they are and who they are becoming. St. Clair (1995) reiterates the importance of providing literature for adolescents who struggle with what it means to be homosexual.

If we as teachers truly believe that literature helps students understand themselves and the issues they face, then we have an obligation to provide our gay students with the same resources as we do other minority students (43).

We certainly support this view and additionally recommend heeding Cart's reminder in his 1997 article, "Honoring their stories, too: Literature for Gay and Lesbian Teens," where he asserts that all students need to read about gay and lesbian characters. He suggests that "sometimes a certain narrative distance may be necessary to make that possible" (43). Perhaps gay and lesbian characters who are integral to the story but not the focus can help us add verisimilitude in our efforts to open the minds of all of our students. Cart asserts his hope when he echoes Marion Dane

Bauer's introduction to her 1994 anthology *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence* as both speculate that in ten years "gay and lesbian characters will be as integrated into juvenile literature as they are in life" (44). Now that Cart's decade has passed, are there, as he envisions, texts where gay and lesbians fill roles just as any heterosexual character might?

Cart examined his own premise in 2004 in "What a Wonderful World: Notes of the Evolution of GLBTQ Literature for Young Adults." He traces the history of the homosexual as a character in both adult and young adult American fiction. From the publication of the first young adult gay novel, *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan published in 1969 to David Leviathan's *Boy Meets Boy* in 2003, Cart counts only around 150 texts in between. He concludes, however, that these numbers are on the rise; he finds "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 . . ." (52).

If Cart's research is right, and we believe it is, we intend in this discussion to suggest recently published possibilities among those texts that could be used to introduce all students to GLBTQ characters as whole-class reading selections, thematically as literature circle choices, as part of classroom libraries, or as recommendations for individual students, no matter the sexual orientation,

Caillouet (2007), in her article "Searching for the Happily-Ever-After: Young Adult Literature and the Lesbian Continuum," suggests the reader begin with James Howe's *The Misfits* (2003). She quotes Howe's interview which accompanies the audio version of the book where he says he wrote "the story not 'to change anyone's thinking' but 'to open thinking and open hearts'" (9). Howe's novel reaches out to younger teens and preteens who are beginning to experience the hormonal upheaval that characterizes middle level

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development. In a hilarious tale, Bobby Goodspeed, the overweight, generally quiet and unassuming main character is twelve and moonlights as a tie salesman. His posse includes three other misfits: Addie Carle, a tall, intelligent and outspoken girl; Joe Bunch, the creative, gay character; and Skeezie Tookis, a black-leather-jacketed hooligan with questionable personal hygiene. The four have been the target of cruel name-calling and now that they're in seventh grade, they

intend to fight back. Addie convinces them to enter the upcoming student council elections, but her brashness offends fellow classmates, teachers, and the principal.

Bobby finally takes the hero's role and during his campaign reveals his feelings about the hurtful nicknames he has acquired—Pork Chop, Dough Boy, Lardo, and Fluff. Soon others begin to listen and take notice. The message about preadolescent stereotyping and the devastating effects of degrading labels rings true.

Joe is just another kid who doesn't fit in and is the victim of name calling, but he is also an accepted, confident member of a group of friends. Bobby notes early in Chapter 2: "Joe figures he is who he is and what's the big deal, and I figure he is right about that" (12). Students need opportunities to experience the friendship among "the misfits" who rise up against the status quo and convince classmates of the harm that bigotry can cause. The text makes an excellent read-aloud for tweens who are just beginning to experience the pangs of puberty. This novel sets the stage for helping students identify with Joe as just another member of the gang who also happens to represent that 10 percent of the population who might have a representative sitting in that very classroom with them.

Another suggestion for younger teens is *Between Mom and Jo* (2006) by Julie Ann Peters. Nicholas Nathaniel Thomas Tyler is fourteen with four first

names and two mothers. Nick's biological mom is the dependable one while Jo, her partner, is more reckless and impetuous. The impact of Mom's cancer and Jo's alcoholism leads to divorce. Because the women are a same-sex couple, Jo has no biological or legal right to Nick, although he prefers to live with her. What many of our students will see as an odd set-up, Nick views as normal. This is a novel that can initiate discussion on preconceptions, stereotypes, and fairness without dealing with an adolescent as the homosexual protagonist. Additionally, the problems both mothers have will be familiar to readers although the lesbian lifestyle may not be. Here it is the young protagonist who faces the issue of homosexuality although not his own; cancer, divorce, alcoholism, and custody issues seem more important to Nick than his parental partners' sexuality, and student readers can learn to appreciate this.

In addition to Nick's story mentioned above, Peters contributes novels with young women as protagonists. First, the groundbreaking *Luna* (2004) with its two tales—one is Regan's; and the other, her transgender brother Liam's. Regan has put her life on hold for him, but when he is ready to transition fully into Luna, Liam's alter ego, she is not sure she can handle the fallout. Told from Regan's point of view in the present and in flashback, the novel deals sensitively with an area of sexuality unexplored in young adult literature. A young man is determined to live his true identity, and his family struggles to accept Luna for who she really is. This selection might be too raw for less mature students, but the attention brought to teens who feel they are born in the wrong bodies could doubtless save lives. Transgendered persons may not be homosexual, as Cart states in the second article, but certainly the confusion surrounding their sexuality places them in same category as their GLBQ counterparts. For any teen reader, however, the focus on Regan and her confusion gives credence to a family and social situation many adolescents might not have encountered. Just opening a window for consideration of the transgendered teen offers the potential for increased awareness, even understanding.

A more accessible novel, and thus maybe more useful to the teacher, is Peters' *Far from Xanadu* (2005) where she again deals with adolescent sexual confusion. Xanadu, a sophisticated city teen, is exiled to an aunt and uncle in a small Kansas town after

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drug dealing trouble. She encounters Mike Szabo, who dresses in her dead father's clothes, stars on the softball team, despises her obsessive mother, and engages in binge drinking. Mike admits her attraction to girls, especially Xanadu, as she struggles with the sexuality her gay best friend Jamie openly avows. The residents of Coalton accept Mike and Jamie; however, Mike grows to accept that she must leave the town to find a meaningful relationship, and sports may be the way out for her. The interaction and vulnerability of the characters, both gay and straight, places the three at the intersection of adolescent issues no matter the sexual orientation. The role reversals Mike epitomizes give readers a chance to reconsider their views on sexual stereotyping, as well as observe that support for a troubled teen can come from unexpected sources.

Bonnie Shimko's *Letters in the Attic* (2002) features Lizzy McMann as the twelve-year-old narrator who moves to upstate New York in the 1960s with her newly divorced mother to live with Lizzy's grandmother. Lizzy falls in love with Eva Singer, her movie-star-lovely new friend and neighbor. Although Eva finds a boyfriend and doesn't reciprocate her friend's crush, Lizzy must deal with the fallout after Eva tries to commit suicide when her hidden dyslexia adds to her feelings of unworthiness at home. This tale of first love unfolds through Lizzy's struggles with the ebb and flow of early adolescent physical and emotional development. The middle school adolescent who is just beginning to look for romance and dealing with crushes would identify with Lizzy's unreturned love while seeing the ties that friendship can forge between two mismatched young girls.

David Levithan has emerged as one of the strongest voices in the genre of gay fiction, and as noted above, Cart cites his novel *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) as a seminal publication in gay fiction. It features Paul as a high school sophomore who lives in what is essentially gaytopia, a fictional community somewhere on the eastern coast. Cart states: "It is the only novel since the genre began in 1969 that has no hint of selfhatred. . . ." (51). This unnamed community where Paul lives is populated with hilarious characters and situations; for example, Darlene, a transvestite, is Homecoming Queen and the quarterback of the football team. Paul has been identified as gay since kindergarten, which is a plus for the PTA, and the Boy

Scouts are Joy Scouts as they became inclusive because of Paul while the Gay Straight Alliance is the most stellar group in school. All of this might be over the top, but Levithan adds friendship issues to Paul's wooing of the new guy Noah through his other friends—Tony and Joni, who are straight, and Kyle, who is not. Imagining a hate-free world where everyone can love without fear may indeed be fantastical, but this is a story that all teens of any sexual orientation must read. The concept is fantastic yet believable enough to allow for provocative and important discussion about tolerance embraced with acceptance.

Levithan offers another astounding tour de force in *The Realm of Possibilities* (2004) where he delineates the voices of twenty teens in an urban high school, each with a unique character and an inimitable story to tell. Interrelated as friends or acquaintances, the characters reach out to readers in a series of poems framed by the words of Daniel and Jed, a gay couple celebrating one year together. As Daniel points out, ". . . my parents are okay with me being gay/but they would kill me if they saw me with/a cigarette. . ." (5).

The others reveal themselves in their own words as members of a high school community including a self-obsessed popular girl, an anorexic with a body-building jock boyfriend, a girl with a mother dying from cancer, one with a crush on her straight friend, and a young man engaging in sexual experimentation with his girlfriend. Their stories will resonate with teens who can recognize themselves and their friends in Levithan's portraits of all the possibilities in the adolescent world, and ultimately society as a whole. The poetic prose format, so popular with teens for its easy-reading flow, makes the novel accessible, and the powerful messages are clear. Every teen can identify with one or more of the characters and examine

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sexual identity from a myriad of viewpoints that can lead to challenging discussions with students and among them.

Another novel utilizing the poetic prose genre is Helen Frost's *Keesha's House* (2003). Using sestinas and sonnets, Frost introduces the reader to the teens who found shelter, temporary or permanent, in a house Joe inherited from his aunt. She took him in when he was 12, and now he returns the favor to those who are like he was. Keesha is there because her mother is dead, and her dad is a mean drunk; she invites the others when life overwhelms them. The

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residents at one time or another include Stephanie, who is pregnant at 16, and Katie who lives in the basement as she escapes a stepfather intent on molesting her. Harris has just come out to his parents; his homophobic father bans him from the family home, so Harris has been living in his car. The

situations are realistic, and the adults in these teens' lives also speak eloquently in poetic form. *Keesha's House* presents issues faced by adolescents who are all, in one way or another, outsiders seeking a home. The text makes a wonderful readers' theater as the teens alternate their stories in each section while two sections are devoted to the adults who are dealing with the characters and also have their own memories of adolescent upheaval which assail them. By adopting a role, rather than stating his or her own opinion, an adolescent could safely examine alternative viewpoints.

For fantasy enthusiasts, British writer Geoffrey Huntington offers a Gothic adventure in the Ravenscliff Series where the reader first meets Devon March in *Sorcerers of the Night Wing* (2002). Devon's unusual powers include levitating his dog, disappearing at will, and moving objects with only his mind. After his father's death, he is sent to live at Ravenscliff, where he hopes the mysteries of his past will be revealed. In the sequel *Demon Witch* (2003), Devon battles demons, vampires, and witches. Both books feature his group of friends, which include D. J., the rebel; Ana, the airhead; and the openly gay

Marcus. A third book, *Blood Moon*, promises more of the perils of inheriting the title and abilities of a Sorcerer of the Order of the Night Wing. Fantasy seems to appeal to readers who seek an escape from reality, and gay/lesbian teen fiction offers this series, and others, where homosexuality is simply part of the character, not part of the plot. As students study character development, sexuality could become just another aspect, rather than the key motivation for behavior.

Sarra Manning's *Pretty Things* (2005) continues the realistic problem novel. Set in England, four young girls participate in a summer drama workshop preparing for a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Told in alternating voices, a romantic triangle develops when Brie loves her gay best friend, Charlie, who prefers straight Walker, who falls for lesbian Daisy. Charlie doesn't think that being gay is his only identity while Daisy begins to enjoy sex with both Walker and her girlfriend. As in Shakespeare's play, issues of confusion, complications, and miscommunication eventually end in resolution for each character. The novel is explicit, so placing it in a classroom offers a risk, but the maturity of the subject matches the lives of too many older adolescents to ignore its potential for reaching readers confused about their place in the world.

A similar relationship occurs in Maureen Johnson's *Bermudez Triangle* (2004) where high school seniors Nina, Avery, and Mel are inseparable friends. While Nina is away at summer leadership camp, Avery and Mel fall in love with each other. On her return, Nina feels isolated and alone as she deals with accepting the romance between her two girlfriends while they seek time to be with the other. Avery cannot handle the pressure of discovery, seeks a heterosexual relationship, and leaves Mel to turn to Nina for comfort. The three obsess over their romances, fall in and out of love, discover new friendships, and stagger toward adulthood just as eighteen year olds about to graduate do, regardless of sexual orientation. Asking students to compare their own uncertainties over romantic tensions as high school draws to a close has value while they face the future with all its possibilities; the dialogue could help those who are questioning or not at this important crossroads for older teens.

Another realistic problem novel is Terry

Trueman's *7 Days at the Hot Corner* (2007), featuring Scott, a high school senior who deals with the shock of discovering that his best friend Travis is gay. Scott fixates only on the city baseball championship, his position on third base (the "hot corner" of the title), and potential college scholarships. After Travis confesses during the tournament that he is gay, Scott ends up with Travis's blood on his hands during a session at the batting cages. Scott fears the worst, and the seven days of baseball mirror the seven-day waiting period required at the county health clinic for the results of Scott's AIDS test. In addition, Travis has been thrown out of the house by his homophobic parents and moves in with Scott's dad. The highs and lows of a young athlete who suddenly finds himself deep in emotional turmoil over his best friend's revelations accompany vivid sports' commentary and action. The information about AIDS and HIV makes the book valuable for all teens, and its appeal for baseball enthusiasts makes the facts palatable in a tense read. Scott has to examine his own reactions and beliefs in this fast-paced novel, and other young men can follow his journey toward self-understanding.

Brent Hartinger's award-winning series about the secret gay-straight alliance created at Goodkind High School begins with the euphemistically titled *Geography Club* (2003). Russel Middlebrook and his gay and lesbian pals are presented as likeable teens who speak realistic dialogue in dealing with the differences they must keep hidden in the hypercritical world of high school. In the first sequel, *The Order of the Poison Oak* (2005), Russel spends the summer as a counselor in a camp for burn victims where he hopes to escape his identity as the token gay guy. He and the campers create the Order as a special club dedicated to all types of outcasts. The newest sequel is a real *Split Screen* (2007) where Russel and his best friend Min Wei sign on as extras in the locally filmed version of *Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies* and also the title of Russel's tale. Min, incidentally a lesbian, writes of her adventures in *Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies*, which the reader finds by flipping over Russel's story. The filming provides students from other schools as extras playing normal high school students who gradually morph into zombies. This setting provides the backdrop for teen romance, adolescent treachery, prejudice, and resolution just

like any other teen problem novel. Hartinger's breezy style and his own collection of misfits has echoes of Howe's book mentioned at the beginning of this analysis. His are in high school and are much more charismatic, outrageous, and passionate enough to entice the older reader into the zany happenings of this appealing crew.

The final selection is a powerful collection of short stories by Nancy Garden, *Hear Us Out! Lesbian and Gay Stories of Struggle, Progress, and Hope, 1950 to the Present* (2007). Garden writes of the changing rights and social status of gay and lesbian adults and teens

told by decades. The history of the changing rights and social status of gay and lesbian teens is told through essays and short stories. Beginning with the 1950s, each essay describes a decade in broad political and social terms with references to specific events pertinent to GLBTQ adults and teens of that era. The essay is followed by two stories, written by Garden and set during the decade featured in the essay. As this article has maintained, stories show how fiction reveals truth perhaps more subtly and powerfully than nonfiction. The issues and questions thus reach all teens, making it easier for contemporary youth to deal with the past and hopefully with their present. Like the other works recommended, these stories can be used to raise issues and questions about sexual orientation and behavior in the light of history. This information is just as vital, imperative, and significant for heterosexual adolescents as it is for those who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, or still questioning their sexuality.

The above suggestions highlight only a few of the novels we feel might help classroom teachers and

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others approach the issues faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, questioning adolescents. As Cart so lyrically states in his decade ago appeal:

We need. . . more good novels that also inform the minds and hearts of non-homosexual readers, that offer them opportunities for insight and empathy by shattering stereotypes and humanizing their gay and lesbian peers. Not to have such books is an invitation to ignorance, which leads to fear, which leads to demonizing instead of humanizing, which leads to violence against not only the body but the spirit (45).

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