

Hear Us Out!

LGBTQ Young Adult Literature Wishes Are Answered!

Michael Cart issued his clarion call for the inclusion of “gay/lesbian adolescent literature” in libraries and classrooms in 1997 with his landmark article, “Honoring Their Stories, Too: Literature for Gay and Lesbian Teens,” published in *The ALAN Review*. His emotional plea at the conclusion resonates:

We urgently need more serious attention to books for and about gay and lesbian and—yes—bisexual young people. We need more good novels that give faces to gay and lesbian young people; we need more good novels that offer them the shock of recognition, the knowledge that they are not alone; more good novels that 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. (p. 45)

Cart remains one of the leading voices in the quest for more compassionate and realistic young adult literature (YAL) texts, both fiction and nonfiction, that feature Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Questioning (LGBTQ) themes, plots, and characters. Following his lead, at the 1998 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention, we (Judith and Lisa) presented our summary of the then-current YAL offerings featuring LGBTQ themes and a wish list of suggestions for future works. The titles we reviewed were overwhelmingly similar, sharing common themes and characteristics that occurred so frequently as to become stereotypical.

During that 1998 presentation, we identified common characteristics of past LGBTQ young adult

novels, one of which was a tendency to present *being* LGBTQ as the central difficulty to be faced or reconciled. That being said, LGBTQs were also often secondary characters, rather than main ones, and victims rather than leaders. The overwhelming majority of LGBTQ characters were gay or lesbian; bisexuality was seldom represented. Characters were underdeveloped, representing *types*, such as males who had ominous pasts involving predatory behavior toward boys. Males were portrayed as especially feminine or flamboyant. Females were portrayed as especially masculine and were often physical education teachers who guided teens until, mocked by heterosexual girls and plagued by rumors, were pushed toward an unwanted outing. Unlike males, females’ sexuality was usually not revealed until the story’s end.

Characters’ lives remained abnormally isolated, and they were seldom seen with a partner, although older females had “roommates.” Murky, undefined past problems brought characters to current locations for new beginnings or led to current situations. Their lives were considered questionable by heterosexuals, and when characters’ sexuality was discovered, few heterosexual characters offered support. Men were frequently physically attacked and/or driven from the community by male mobs. Women were usually subject to rumors, anonymous letters, ridicule, etc. Characters became resigned to unfair fates, did not fight for themselves, and displayed shame over being LGBTQ.

Novels’ resolutions usually depended upon the LGBTQ character’s story departure. Female outings were often from quick, quiet job resignations

and relocation. However, males usually died, often violently and frequently from car accidents. If characters remained, they were frequently seen as having HIV/AIDS or terminal cancer. After LGBTQ characters absented a story, the remaining characters and town “returned to normal.” The LGBTQ character was remembered as an unfortunate “lesson.”

Nearly all religious views espoused hatred of LGBTQs in the form of Christian fundamentalism. Significantly, characters were mainly white and middle class.

While this compilation of issues in its entirety is dated and demeaning, it must be remembered that these qualities, although common, were of course neither novel templates nor did they necessarily represent all novels with LGBTQ characters. Many works had merit, but regardless, the majority did not display the quality found today. However, what these novels lacked is as telling as what they contained; for literary and genre excellence, LGBTQ works needed reality and vision. With that focus, we created our 1998 wish list:

Qualities Necessary for Excellence in LGBTQ Young Adult Novels

- Sexuality is not the central issue or problem to be overcome.
- LGBTQ characters are protagonists.
- LGBTQ characters are multifaceted rather than stereotypes.
- LGBTQ characters are admired and in leadership positions.
- LGBTQ characters have a wide circle of friends, including heterosexuals.
- LGBTQ characters are seen in healthy, positive romantic relationships.
- LGBTQ characters represent various diversities, such as non-white, disabled, elderly, etc.
- LGBTQ characters represent genres other than contemporary issues/problem novels, such as mystery, fantasy, science fiction, etc.
- Various religions are portrayed rather than solely Christian fundamentalism; hatred is not synonymous with any religion or view, and not all aspects identifying with a religious view are homophobic. In addition, LGBTQ characters are shown with positive religious beliefs.

What has been published since 1998 that both answers Cart’s request and addresses our wish list? What are the reading choices for all teens that give identity to today’s LGBTQ young people? Where can they find themselves in their own stories? Where are texts that help heterosexual readers understand gay/lesbian struggles as they all traverse the journey of what is too often painful adolescence? The young man who committed suicide in the fall of 2010 at Rutgers University after his roommate and a female acquaintance posted online video of his romantic encounters with another male illustrates that our concerns are still valid.

Fortunately, there are signs that many educators, librarians, and authors are continuing efforts to expand and popularize the field. For instance, *English Journal (EJ)* in March 2009 published a themed issue on Sexual Identity and Gender Variance, compiled by guest editors Paula Ressler and Becca Chase. The promise and premise stated that the contributions would “discuss the place of LGBTQ people, curriculum, and concerns in schools” (p. 5). The compilation begins with the National Council of Teachers of English’s “Resolution on Strengthening Teacher Knowledge of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Issues,” proposed and passed at the 2007 NCTE Annual Business Meeting in New York, ironically ten years after Cart’s appeal.

EJ’s themed issue is filled with articles about using young adult LGBT texts in the classroom and about bolstering the knowledge, confidence, and support of teachers who are inexperienced or uncomfortable with the subject. In their “Introduction,” Ressler and Chase cite chilling statistics compiled by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educational Network and others:

- 73.6% of LGBT students heard derogatory remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke” frequently or often at school.
- 86.2% of LGBT reported being verbally harassed, 44.1% reported being physically harassed, and

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22.1% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation . . . (p. 18).

Equally painful are these LGBT teen statements, compiled during 2002–2005 by The Lambda Organization (2010):

- 97% of LGBTs regularly heard homophobic remarks, with 53% by school staff; 80% of preservice educators reported that they themselves held some level of negative views toward homosexuals.
- Educators failed to intervene in 97% of incidents involving verbal harassment or physical violence of LGBTs.
- 89% of LGBT teens reported severe social isolation, with 42% of homeless youth LGBT.
- LGBT teens accounted for 30% of teen suicides. (p. 2)

Can young adult literature produce better understanding of LGBTQ issues for teens, in schools and out, while providing real solutions to these horrors?

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The *EJ* editors provide a blueprint for those of us who intend to continue to champion the problems LGBTQ youth experience by offering quality YAL to all.

The ALAN Review (*TAR*) continues to publish book reviews, text analyses, and author interviews that keep LGBTQ at the forefront, although issues can be found where no articles about LGBT authors, texts, or classroom practice

are evident. However, in 2004, Cart again examined the status of the field in *TAR* as he traced the “evolution” of the literature. He assured readers that the number of opportunities for gay and lesbian teens to see themselves in quality YAL has indeed risen. We concur.

LGBTQ young adult literature titles are indeed routinely reviewed in English language arts and other professional journals, with various articles also regularly appearing without the necessity of isolating the

topic into “special” issues. *VOYA* (*The Voice of Youth Advocates*) continually reviews and features print and nonprint LGBTQ texts and resources, along with information about authors, teens, and related concerns. Additionally, *VOYA* publishes issues with LGBTQ-themed sections, rotating them with features on other YAL genres, such as poetry or mystery/suspense, thus eliminating any hint of dissimilarity among genres.

Multicultural Review consistently reviews the newest LGBTQ-themed titles, also placing them with all other young adult texts. These journals and others no longer attach the once-common “content warning” labels on such titles. Stand-alone and online bookstores continue to provide access to LGBTQ works for all ages. The market expands and increases with demand.

After Cart’s 2004 update, we found additional compelling evidence that a body of literature does indeed exist that focuses on problem novels where being LGBTQ was not the plot’s nucleus; rather, in many works, all characters are treated as adolescents living the teen experience, no matter their sexuality. Not only is this thematic change the first item on our 1998 wish list, it is also the single most positive and defining movement toward LGBTQ adolescent works that not only leave binding stereotypes behind, but also free the way for new publications featuring homosexual teens as adolescents first, sharing the same difficulties and issues as other teens rather than being featured as the problem themselves.

A few years ago, we recommended titles we both consider important contributions to the field (Hayn & Hazlett, 2008). Some of those books continue to resonate with us today, along with more recent publications that have the potential to influence teens, no matter who they are. Many of the same authors we cited then continue to write specifically for and about homosexual teens and their search for identity.

As stated above, the best works portray LGBTQs in various situations and genres, interacting with an array of people, their sexuality simply one part of them, while they maintain heterosexual friendships. Current YAL continually offers texts that match the first six items of our 1998 wish list. A notable example appears in David Levithan’s 2004 *The Realm of Possibility*, where Daniel states, “My parents are okay with me being gay but they would kill me if they saw me with a cigarette . . .” (p. 5). Later, he worries about

classmates' reactions to his homosexuality and boyfriend; after this becomes known, he says, "We . . . were a little surprised when nothing happened except our surprise . . ." (p. 9).

It is refreshing to read novels featuring LGBTQ characters that are just plain funny; earlier novels were often so focused upon the "problem" of homosexuality that humor was excluded. Today, however, it would be difficult not to laugh aloud reading Brian Sloan's 2005 *A Really Nice Prom Mess*, with gay Cameron somehow taking a girl to the prom, becoming involved in an on-stage performance, suffering multiple misunderstandings, and finally experiencing a police chase during his beyond-disastrous prom. Most teens have surely had catastrophic party experiences, and this novel and others show the shared humorous universalities. Perhaps more important, readers are laughing with, rather than at, LGBTQ characters.

Humor and commiseration continue in Sarra Manning's 2005 *Pretty Things*, featuring straight Bree in love with gay Charlie, who has a crush on straight Walker, who likes Daisy, who is unsure of whether she is lesbian or bisexual. This amusing and realistic jumble of friends seeking love focuses upon their messy relationship quests and sometimes dubious advice to one other, with sexuality simply a given; moreover, the characters assist Daisy, and presumably readers, in clarifying her bisexuality.

All adolescents beginning relationships are vulnerable and susceptible to some degree, with abusive partners a danger to all, as illustrated by awkward Johanna who excitedly embarks upon her first relationship with the experienced Reeve in Julie Ann Peters's 2009 *Rage: A Love Story*. Although Reeve becomes increasingly abusive, naïve Johanna blames herself in striving to maintain their disastrous partnership. Only afterwards can she objectively assess her relationship, which could be both cautionary and reassuring to readers.

Older novels frequently featured religion as a weapon used against homosexuals; now both LGBTQ and heterosexual teens are shown grappling with sexuality versus religious doctrine realistically—informative for all readers and particularly the devout. A notable example of this wish list item is Leanne Lieberman's 2008 *Gravity*, featuring Ellie, a devoted orthodox Jew until falling in love with another female. She believes she must either alter her sexuality or

renounce her religion, until her mother and sister offer alternative concepts of God that assist her (and readers') acceptance of herself as a devout Jewish lesbian. Alex Sanchez's *The God Box* (2007) offers another example of realistic religious issues when Paul, a traditional Christian with a long-time girlfriend, meets openly gay Manuel, also a Christian. Manuel causes Paul to reexamine his beliefs of Christianity as they both come to terms with their own homosexuality.

Another wish list item was LGBTQs' appearance in genres other than contemporary realistic fiction; this small but growing category has the added bonus of incorporating several genre elements within novels. In Malinda Lo's 2009 *Ash*, a retelling of the Cinderella fairy tale, Ash intends to remain in the faery world with her beloved, handsome Sidhean—until meeting the seductive Kaisa, the king's huntress, and the kingdom's equally stunning prince. Twists abound, with Ash finally and dramatically choosing Kaisa as romance/fantasy readers are held spellbound.

The one wish list category poorly represented remains diversity and exceptionality, as few current quality titles feature LGBTQ protagonists who also struggle with other specific characteristics of difference, whether they be physical, spiritual, or psychological. An exception is a supporting novel, Pamela Ehrenberg's 2009 *Tillmon County Fire*, where an adoptee, a gay male, a religious zealot, a pregnant female, and an autistic boy narrate their versions of a shocking fire in their town. Another option is Alex Flinn's 2005 *Fade to Black*, portraying an HIV-positive high school student, hospitalized after being attacked; the bigot accused of the crime, and the sole witness, a classmate with Down syndrome, share from three perspectives how the assault changed them and their lives. We urge more titles focusing on all aspects of diversity; their limited LGBTQ presence should spur this category's growth.

Naturally, wish lists look toward the possibilities of the future, with LGBTQ offerings doing likewise.

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In David Levithan's 2005 *Boy Meets Boy*, the high school quarterback is also the homecoming queen, the school's gay/straight alliance exists only to teach straight kids how to dance, and being gay is just that. Similarly, Garden's 2007 short story collection *Hear Us Out! Lesbian and Gay Stories of Struggle, Progress, and Hope: 1950 to the Present* contains stories chronicling the lives of lesbians and gays in America from the 1950s to the present, with its final story portraying universal acceptance for all. Her title is particularly insightful for the view we maintain; "struggle, progress, and hope" abound in the YAL world, too.

The state of current young adult literature featuring LGBTQ characters is thriving and, with a few exceptions, fulfilling those needs espoused by our original 1998 wish list with titles that are of quality and offer entertainment. Viewed as good books, rather than "LGBTQ" books, and enjoyed by a variety of readers, we highlight just a few of the titles that facilitate teens' perception, awareness, and inclusion of others and themselves while developing their ability to lead meaningful, productive adult lives.

William Banks, in his article in that 2009 themed *English Journal*, "Literacy, Sexuality, and the Value(s) of Queer Young Adult Literature," agrees with us when he writes of his own experience seeking out LGBT as a young man: "The characters that inhabited gay literature from the 1960s to the 1990s, even if at times positive and sympathetic, taught me to disconnect and move on" (p. 33). Our hope is that the texts listed above and others lead you and your students to engage with these characters, ultimately leading all of us to knowledge, self-awareness, and action regarding those teens in our classrooms who are LGBTQ and those who are not.

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