

The Stonewall Book Awards for Children's and Young Adult Literature, 2010–2014:

Memorable Characters, Current Directions

The headlines and events of today speak loudly of our progress as a society and a nation in how the LGBT community is viewed and treated. The outcry over some US states' attempts to pass religious freedom bills that could negatively impact the LGBT community (Eckholm, 2015, March 30), Major League Baseball's efforts to welcome LGBT players (National Public Radio, 2015), and universities offering scholarships to hard-working students who identify as LGBT (see <http://www.utsa.edu/inclusion/>) all indicate a growing cultural change over the past several years. The new release of the updated version of the classic picturebook *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman, 2015), first published in 1989, indicates a promising direction for the LGBT community—and all young readers. In recent years, young adult literature (YAL) has mirrored these societal and national trends with a noteworthy increase in the number of books with LGBT main characters—books that depict the complexity of human relationships regardless of sexual orientation (Cart & Jenkins, 2015). These books can speak to many teens who need to see themselves in the stories and novels they read.

Given the importance of young adult books with LGBT characters, we wanted to explore the nature of these books and the current depictions of the characters within them. With this in mind, we conducted a narrative analysis to gain a deeper understanding of high-quality LGBT books currently available to students. We first present what we know about LGBT

young adult literature and then describe our examination of award-winning books with LGBT characters.

LGBT Young Adult Literature

John Donovan's (2010) novel, *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, originally published in 1969, was the first young adult novel to address sexual identity issues and led the way for subsequent publications. In their extensive analysis of young adult books with LGBT content, Cart and Jenkins (2006) noted that from 1969 to 2004, approximately 200 books were published. During these years, the average was roughly five books per year. More recently, Cart (2011) found that the number of "best" books for young readers selected annually in November by the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Tables (the Rainbow List) ranged from a high of 46 in 2010 to a low of 16 in 2011. With an interest in the last several years, we conducted our own count of books on the Rainbow List and found an average of 44 books per year from 2009 to 2014 (see <http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>). In short, there appears to be a promising increase in the number of young adult books with LGBT content being published.

Across the past four decades, Cart and Jenkins (2006) noted significant changes in young adult books with LGBT content. The 1970s included books that depicted homosexuality in a negative light and as something that could be changed. Some YAL charac-

ters denied their sexual orientation, and there was a persistently present fear of being physically assaulted by others. During the 1980s, some books were more positive. For example, gay parents as positive role models began to appear, as seen in Billy's Uncle Wes in *The Arizona Kid* (Koertge, 2005). LGBT characters were also found in minor roles, as siblings, teachers, and other adults. With the AIDS virus appearing during this time, books also began to mention the disease.

In the 1990s, many LGBT books focused explicitly on homosexuality (Cart & Jenkins, 2006), with homophobia as the major conflict in a large number of stories. For example, many books contain bullying episodes resulting from homophobic reactions toward LGBT characters (Harmon & Henkin, 2014). The late 1990s saw the inclusion of more LGBT characters in young adult books—a change in the sociocultural landscape indicating a wider acceptance of diverse individuals (Wickens, 2011).

While books published earlier depicted gay and lesbian characters as victims, more recent stories portray LGBT characters in positive roles where they are confident in their own identities (Cole, 2009). Since the turn of the century, we also see an increasing number of books with transgender characters, such as Julie Ann Peters's *Luna* (2004), as well as more books with same-sex parents and lesbian protagonists (Cart, 2011). Still another interesting change in more recently published books is the increase in nonfiction titles with LGBT content. Two new and notable young adult books are *Rethinking Normal* (Hill, 2014) and *Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen* (Andrews, 2014), both of which tell the true stories of transgender adolescents who were once romantically involved.

Award-Winning Books with LGBT Content and Characters

Several awards honor young adult books with LGBT content, including The American Library Association's Stonewall Book Awards for Children's and Young Adult Literature. Beginning in 2010, the Stonewall Book Awards expanded a program to honor exceptional and meritorious English language adult books that address the lives of LGBT characters to include excellent, high-quality books for children and young adults. In addition to fiction, the books selected for this award

include different genres (e.g., nonfiction books) and book formats (e.g., picturebooks and graphic novels), opening the award to a wider range of texts with a LGBT focus.

The Stonewall Awards, along with other awards given to young adult books with LGBT characters, such as the Rainbow Award and the Lambda Literary Award, provide solid affirmation of the literary quality of the winning books while also acknowledging the value of young adult literature. Specifically, the Lambda Award, which honors published works with LGBT themes published in the United States (see <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/>), is given annually by the Lambda Literary Foundation, an organization that promotes LGBT literature and supports emerging authors. Like the Stonewall Book Awards, the Rainbow Award is sponsored by the American Library Association and honors LGBT books for children and adolescents. These award-winning books make a significant contribution to the field of young adult literature by modeling excellence in the development of character, plot, theme, and style. In addition, these books can encourage readers to think more deeply about what they already know and perhaps challenge existing ideas. Given their high quality, these books offer complex “levels of meaning, language conventions and clarity, and knowledge demands in which the reader must employ . . . specific prior knowledge such as cultural understanding” (Logan, Lasswell, Hood, & Watson, 2014, p. 32).

Given that the Stonewall Awards are one of the most recent awards to recognize quality young adult literature with LGBT content, we believe that the winners and honor books offer a solid representation of current and well-regarded books in the field. (See Table 1 for the list of winners and honors.) In fact, many of the winners were also recipients of the other awards mentioned previously. We analyzed the award-winning and honor books to find out more about what these high-quality books with LGBT characters might offer the field of young adult literature, especially in light of what the books may offer readers who need to see themselves in the characters.

We began our analysis by randomly selecting *Fat Angie* (Charleton-Trujillo, 2013) to read independently, taking notes about genre, format, types of character, facets of character, and character relationships and conflicts. (Note that books mentioned in this section are listed in Table 1, not in the reference

Table 1. Stonewall Book Awards for Children’s and Young Adult Literature, 2010–2014

<p>2014 Winners Cronn-Mills, K. (2012). <i>Beautiful music for ugly children</i>. Woodbury, MN: Flux. Charlton-Trujillo, e.E. (2013). <i>Fat Angie</i>. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.</p> <p>Honor Books Federle, T. (2013). <i>Better Nate than ever</i>. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. Levithan, D. (2013). <i>Two boys kissing</i>. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf. Settingington, K. (2013). <i>Branded by the pink triangle</i>. Toronto, ON: Second Story Press.</p> <p>2013 Winner Sáenz, B. A. (2012). <i>Aristotle and Dante discover the secrets of the universe</i>. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.</p> <p>Honor Books Adams, S. J. (2011). <i>Sparks: The epic, completely true blue, (almost) holy quest of Debbie</i>. Woodbury, MN: Flux. Moskowitz, H. (2012). <i>Gone, gone, gone</i>. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. Newman, L. (2012). <i>October mourning: A song for Matthew Shepard</i>. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press. Telgemeier, R. (2011). <i>Drama</i>. New York, NY: Graphix.</p> <p>2012 Winner Wright, B. (2011). <i>Putting makeup on the fat boy</i>. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.</p> <p>Honor Books Farrey, B. (2011). <i>With or without you</i>. New York, NY: Simon Pulse. Merey, I. (2011). <i>a + e 4ever: A graphic novel</i>. Maple Shade, NJ: Lethe Press. Wilkinson, L. (2009). <i>Pink</i>. New York, NY: HarperTeen. Yee, P. (2011). <i>Money boy</i>. Scarborough, ON: Groundwood Books.</p> <p>2011 Winner Katcher, B. (2009). <i>Almost perfect</i>. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.</p> <p>Honor Books Green, J. & Levithan, D. (2010). <i>Will Grayson, Will Grayson</i>. New York, NY: Dutton. Hurwin, D. W. (2009). <i>Freaks and revelations</i>. New York, NY: Little, Brown. Klise, J. (2010). <i>Love drugged</i>. Woodbury, MN: Flux. Walliams, D. (2008). <i>The boy in the dress</i>. New York, NY: Razorbill.</p> <p>2010 Winner Bard, N. (2009). <i>The vast fields of ordinary</i>. New York, NY: Penguin.</p> <p>Honor Books Alsenas, L. (2008). <i>Gay America: A struggle for equality</i>. New York, NY: Amulet Books. Ewert, M. (2008). <i>10,000 dresses</i>. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press. Newman, L. (2009). <i>Daddy, Papa, and me</i>. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press. Newman, L. (2009). <i>Mommy, Mama, and me</i>. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press. Peck, D. (2009). <i>Sprout</i>. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.</p>
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list.) Then we came together to discuss the book in regard to these categories and to arrive at agreement as to what we noticed. We applied this procedure for the remaining books as well, discussing our findings as we read. However, we came to realize that

the characters and conflicts in the books were more complex and needed a closer examination. Inspired by what Logan and her colleagues (2014) describe as text complexity, we then examined the Stonewall book winners in regard to character and conflict complexity.

Similar to Butcher and Hinton's (2014) descriptions of character, we considered the characters as complex if they were dynamic and multidimensional both in terms of character traits and the range of feelings and emotions they exhibited. For example, we defined 18-year-old Evan in *With or Without You* (Farrey, 2011) as a complex and multidimensional character given what we learn about the love he has for a secret boyfriend; his loyalty to a best friend; and the developing angst, worry, and fear he experiences when his friend becomes embroiled in a dangerous group called the Chasers.

In comparison, we considered characters as more unidimensional if the feelings and emotions of the character tended to be less varied and more focused on a particular goal or conflict. More unidimensional characters were identified in the books that appeal to younger readers. For example, we defined Bailey in *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008) as unidimensional since he is single-minded in his desire to wear dresses. Throughout each episode in the book, Bailey experiences a pattern of excitement about his dreams of dresses and then disappointment when told by family members that boys do not wear dresses.

For complexity in terms of conflict, we looked at the number of conflicts faced by the character. Given

the difficulty in separating character from conflict, we weave these together in our description of what we noticed among the Stonewall Book Awards recipients.

Description of Findings

What we first noticed following our analysis was the variability of the winning and honor books in terms of genre, format, and character depictions. In recognizing and honoring high-quality LGBT literary works, the Stonewall Book Awards recipients appear to target the interests and tastes of an inclusive audience of young and adolescent readers. The awards for winning and honor books given from 2010 through 2014 represent variety in both genre and format. Of the 26 books on the list for these years, 3 are picturebooks for young children, 2 are nonfiction accounts, 18 are novels, 2 are graphic novels, and 1 is a novel in verse (see Table 2). In addition, while most of the books have a serious and dramatic tone, there are a few in which humor is interjected, such as *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (Wright, 2011) and *Better Nate than Ever* (Federle, 2013). Given the significant number of fiction books in this list, we first describe what we noticed about character and conflict in the picturebooks and YA titles and then describe the three nonfiction books.

Table 2. Description of Stonewall Book Awards for Children and Young Adult Literature, 2010–2014

Year of the Award	Title, Author, Date of Publication, and Publisher	Genre and/or Format	Sexual Orientation	Plot Category(s)	Examples of Other Awards Received
2014	Winner <i>Beautiful Music for Ugly Children</i> K. Cronn-Mills 2012 Flux	Fiction	Gabe/Elizabeth, transgender teen	Know and understand authentic self Pursue personal goals	2014 ALA Popular Paperback for YA; Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist
	Winner <i>Fat Angie</i> e. E. Charlton-Trujillo 2013 Candlewick	Fiction	Angie, lesbian	Discover authentic self Confront life circumstances	Rainbow Top Ten
	Honor <i>Better Nate Than Ever</i> T. Federle 2013 Simon & Schuster	Fiction	Nate, gay teen	Pursue personal goals	2014 Top Ten Best Fiction for YA; Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist
	Honor <i>Two Boys Kissing</i> D. Levithan 2013 Alfred A. Knopf	Fiction	Peter and Neil, Avery and Ryan, Harry and Craig Cooper, gay couples	Focus on peer relationships Focus on family relationships	2014 Top Ten Best Fiction for YA; Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Winner

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Table 2. Continued

	Honor <i>Branded by the Pink Triangle</i> K. Setterington 2013 Second Story Press	Nonfiction	Mainly gays during World War II	n/a	2014 Nominee for YALSA's Nonfiction Award; Rainbow Top Ten
2013	Winner <i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i> B. A. Sáenz 2012 Simon & Schuster	Fiction	Ari and Dante, gay teens	Discover authentic self Know and understand authentic self Focus on peer relationships	Pura Belpre Award; Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Winner Rainbow Top Ten
	Honor <i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i> S. J. Adams 2011 Flux	Fiction	Debbie, lesbian	Focus on peer relationships	n/a
	Honor <i>Gone, Gone, Gone</i> H. Moskowitz 2012 Simon Pulse	Fiction	Craig and Lio, gay teens	Confront life circumstances Focus on peer relationships	n/a
	Honor <i>October Mourning</i> L. Newman 2012 Candlewick Press	Novel in verse (based on true story)	Matthew Shepard, gay man	NA	Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Outstanding Books for the College Bound selection; International Reading Association Young Adults' Choices; Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People
	Honor <i>Drama</i> R. Telgemeier 2012 Graphix	Fiction—Graphic novel	Minor character, gay middle school boy	Pursue personal goals Focus on peer relationships	Rainbow Top Ten Harvey Award Nominee
2012	Winner <i>Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy</i> B. Wright 2011 Simon & Schuster	Fiction	Carlos, gay teen	Pursue personal goals	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Winner Rainbow Top Ten
	Honor <i>With or without You</i> B. Farrey 2011 Simon Pulse	Fiction	Evan, gay teen	Focus on peer relationships	Minnesota Book Award Young People's Literature Nominee
	Honor <i>a + e 4ever</i> I. Merrey 2011 Lethe Press	Fiction—Graphic novel	Asher, gay teen Eulalie, lesbian	Discover authentic self Focus on peer relationships	n/a
	Honor <i>Pink</i> L. Wilkinson 2009 HarperTeen	Fiction	Ava, lesbian	Discover authentic self	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist

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Table 2. Continued

	Honor <i>Money Boy</i> P. Yee 2011 Groundwood Books	Fiction	Ray, gay teen	Confront life circumstances Focus on peer relationships Focus on family relationships	n/a
2011	Winner <i>Almost Perfect</i> B. Katcher 2009 Delacorte Press	Fiction	Sage, transgender teen	Focus on peer relationships	n/a
	Honor <i>Will Grayson, Will Grayson</i> G. Green & D. Levithan 2010 Dutton	Fiction	Tiny, gay teen One Will Grayson, gay teen	Discover authentic self Focus on peer relationships	Children's Choice Book Award for Teen Choice Book of the Year; Abraham Lincoln Award Nominee; Goodreads Choice Nominee for Young Adult Fiction
	Honor <i>Freaks and Revelations</i> D. W. Hurwin 2009 Little, Brown	Fiction (based on a true story)	Jason, gay teen	Confront life circumstances Focus on family relationships	Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award Nominee for Best Young Adult Novel
	Honor <i>Love Drugged</i> J. Klise 2010 Flux	Fiction	Jamie, gay teen	Discover authentic self (does not accept himself) Focus on peer relationships Focus on family relationships	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Nominee
	Honor <i>The Boy in the Dress</i> D. Walliams 2008 Razorbill	Fiction	Dennis, gay teen who is a crossdresser	Know and understand authentic self Focus on peer relationships	n/a
2010	Winner <i>The Vast Fields of Ordinary</i> N. Bard 2009 Penguin	Fiction	Dale, gay teen	Discover authentic self Focus on peer relationships Focus on family relationships	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist
	Honor <i>Gay America: A Struggle for Equality</i> L. Alsenas 2008 Amulet Books	Nonfiction	Gays	n/a	n/a
	Honor <i>10,000 Dresses</i> M. Ewert 2008 Seven Stories Press	Picturebook	Gay parents	Know and understand authentic self	Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist
	Honor <i>Daddy, Papa, and Me</i> L. Newman 2009 Tricycle Press	Picturebook	Gay parents	Know and understand authentic self	n/a

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Table 2. Continued

<p>Honor <i>Mommy, Mama, and Me</i> L. Newman 2009 Tricycle Press</p>	<p>Picturebook</p>	<p>Lesbian parents</p>	<p>Know and understand authentic self</p>	<p>n/a</p>
<p>Honor <i>Sprout</i> D. Peck 2009 Bloomsbury</p>	<p>Fiction</p>	<p>Sprout, gay teen</p>	<p>Confront life circumstances Focus on peer relationships</p>	<p>Lambda Literary Award for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Finalist</p>

Picturebooks

Children’s picturebooks were recognized as honor books in the initial years of the Stonewall Awards. Two of the honor books in 2010, *Mommy, Mama, and Me* (2009) and *Daddy, Papa, and Me* (2009), both written by Leslea Newman, are board books that provide simple depictions of happy, safe families with young children having two mothers or two fathers. It is not surprising, given their appeal to younger readers, that these picturebooks contain characters who experience little or no significant conflict—that is, the characters are not complex. Another 2010 honor book in picturebook format is Marcus Ewert’s *10,000 Dresses* (2008), a whimsical and engaging tale in which young Bailey’s dream of making and wearing dresses comes true. Although the title reflects relatively simple character traits and feelings (excitement and desire to wear dresses but disappointment when family members express disapproval) and conflict (how to make this occur), this seems appropriate given the intended age of the readers.

Young Adult Fiction

The awards from 2010–2014 were mainly given to young adult novels. For these books, we provide a description of what we noticed in regard to the characters in the books as well as several facets of characterization that emerged from our analysis, including conflict.

THE CHARACTERS

Similar to the findings of Cart and Jenkins’s (2006) extensive examination of young adult literature with LGBT content from 1969–2004, in the 18 fiction books we analyzed, the main characters are primarily gay teens. Only three books have lesbian protagonists: *Fat Angie* (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013), *Sparks* (Adams,

2012), and *Pink* (Wilkinson, 2012). Cronn-Mills’s *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012) and Katcher’s *Almost Perfect* (2009) are the only two books with transgender characters. In the graphic novel, *A + E 4ever* (Merey, 2011), two nonconforming teen protagonists—Asher, with an androgynous face, and Eulalie, a lonely but assertive, hard-nosed, strong-willed lesbian—blur gender lines in their interactions with each other and with peers.

FACETS OF CHARACTERIZATION

The portrayal of LGBT characters in the Stonewall Book Awards covers a spectrum of different young adults who grapple with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity amid the challenges of being an adolescent. The feelings displayed by the characters in these books are realistically depicted, lending unmistakable credibility to their reactions to the situations in which they find themselves and also reflecting a level of character complexity.

Our examination of character revealed five facets of characterization. While some of the books contained several facets, we categorized the books based upon those facets of characterization that were critical to the story. The major facets were the following: 1) self-identity, 2) life circumstances, 3) pursuit of personal goals, 4) peer relationships, and 5) family relationships. For each category, we provide a description with examples of books. Because we view the categories as fluid and sometimes overlapping, some characters represented multiple facets of characterization. As a result, we placed some books under more than one category, such as the classification of *Fat Angie* (2013) under self-identity and life circumstances.

Self-identity. In some of the books, the major plot strand focuses on the efforts of the main characters to

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define themselves in regard to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In these titles, self-actualization, or an attempt to find the “authentic self,” drives the plot. In other words, by attending to self-identity, many

characters acknowledge their sexual orientation, openly share with others their same-sex attractions, and describe themselves as gay or lesbian. This is evident in all but four books, where the protagonists are uncertain of their sexual identity. As a result, for this facet of characterization, we labeled two emerging subcategories as “knowing and understanding the authentic self” and “discovering the authentic self.” For “knowing and understanding the authentic self,” we included characters who had some inkling of their sexual identity and leaned toward LGBT. For “discovering the authentic self,” we in-

cluded characters who had no determined idea about their sexual identity.

Two examples of characters we categorized as “knowing and understanding the authentic self” are Nate in *Better Nate Than Ever* (2013) and Dante in Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012). Nate, as a multidimensional character, appears confident in many aspects of his life as he comes to more fully understand his sexual identity. For example, at the beginning of the book, Nate talks about being bullied daily by James Madison and two other boys (both named Bill) and notes that one of the Bills declares Nate “not unfunny for a faggot” (Federle, 2013, p. 27). Nate then tells the reader that he is uncertain about his sexuality:

(My sexuality, by the way: is off-topic and unrelated. I am undecided. I am a freshman at the College of Sexuality and I have undecided my major, and frankly don’t want to declare anything other than “Hey, jerks, I’m thirteen, leave me alone. Macaroni and cheese is still my favorite

food—how would I know who I want to hook up with?).” (Federle, 2013, p. 27)

Toward the end of the book, when Nate finds out that one of the Bills is actually gay, too, his response is, “And one of the Bills is an outcast now. Hey. Maybe he’ll need a friend” (Federle, 2013, p. 261). Nate remains focused on his strong desire to be a star in a Broadway show and does not let his growing understanding of his sexuality interfere with this dream.

Similarly, Dante (*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*) knows and understands himself throughout the novel and is more comfortable about his gender identity than is his friend Ari. For example, when Dante and Ari first meet each other at the local swimming pool, Dante is the one who initiates a conversation with “I can teach you how to swim” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 17). He is also the one who later introduces himself to Ari’s parents. As this friendship develops, Ari describes Dante in this way:

“He [Dante] talked about swimming as if it were a way of life. He was fifteen years old. Who was this guy? He looked a little fragile—but he wasn’t. He was disciplined and tough and knowledgeable and he didn’t pretend to be stupid and ordinary. He was neither of those things. . . . He was funny and focused and fierce. And there wasn’t anything mean about him. I couldn’t understand how you could live in a mean world and not have any meanness rub off on you. How could a guy live without some meanness?” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 19)

Nonetheless, at the end of the book, Dante, despite the confidence he has about his own identity, is brutally beaten because of his openness about his sexuality. After this, Ari notes that “He [Dante] was different. Sadder. The day he came home from the hospital, he cried. I held him. I thought he would never stop. I knew that a part of him would never be the same. They cracked more than his ribs” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 325).

In contrast, *Fat Angie* (2013) by e.E. Charlton-Trujillo provides an example of the “discovering the authentic self” plot strand. While coping with the overwhelming taunting and bullying from others because of her weight problem, ninth grader Angie (called Fat Angie at school) is distraught over her older sister’s capture in Iraq several months before during her tour of duty in the Army. Angie refuses to believe the possibility that her sister may be dead—a sister who was her idol and one who helped the girls’

basketball team win the state championship. Angie's life changes with the appearance of KC Romance, a new girl at school who immediately pays attention to Angie as a person, not someone to belittle. As their relationship grows, Angie comes to realize that her own sexuality, as well as KC's, is what KC labels as "gay girl gay." In the midst of a deepening relationship with KC, Angie contends with incessant bullying at school; a contentious, nonsupportive family; a focused determination to play basketball well; and ultimately her sister's situation. As a complicated character facing complex conflicts, Angie represents a realistic portrayal of how someone might react to the profound circumstances in her life.

Another example of a character "discovering the authentic self" is Ari in Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012). At first, Ari does not understand his developing friendship with Dante, a relationship that ultimately leads Ari to better understand his own identity. While the growing but complicated friendship between Ari and Dante is the major focus of the book, the complex nature of these characters also defines their relationship. Ari is unsure of himself, an introvert with no friends and one who struggles to accept his sexual identity. There is also a level of complexity in the conflicts faced by Ari. He struggles with the ghost that haunts his family: the reason why his older brother is in prison—something his parents have refused to share with him. Ari is also conflicted in trying to understand his father and what happened to him during the Vietnam War. Ari must contend with these conflicts as he tries to understand his relationship with Dante.

In one book, *Love Drugged* (2010) by James Klise, the main character, Jamie, tries desperately to deny his authentic self by hiding that he is gay from his friends. When beautiful and wealthy Celia takes an interest in him, Jamie takes advantage of this opportunity and acts as though he is attracted to her. As this relationship develops, Jamie learns that Celia's father, a doctor and researcher, is experimenting with a new drug that "suppresses the homosexual response in the male brain" (p. 83). With his interest piqued, Jamie steals and begins to take some of the pills, hoping to stimulate a physical attraction toward Celia. Jamie must eventually come to terms with his lies, as well as the wall of deceit he has built around his family and friends. Jamie is not so much a complex character in

regard to the different feelings and emotions elicited in the story as he is filled with determination to quell his homosexual feelings—the one major conflict he faces.

Life circumstances. This facet of characterization features characters who face serious life issues while simultaneously contending with their sexual identities. This facet is especially apparent in the more recent award-winning books where sexuality is not the only issue on which the titles center. For example, in *Fat Angie* (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013), Angie's main concern is her missing-in-action sister. Not knowing if she is alive or dead constantly occupies her thoughts and influences her actions in response to her family and peers.

There are multiple plot strands and complex conflicts in Moskowitz's *Gone, Gone, Gone* (2012). Fifteen-year-old Craig contends with serious events in his life the year after 9/11

when sniper shootings occur around Washington, DC. When his house is burglarized and his menagerie of pets escapes through an open door, Craig is devastated and determined to find all of them. Another serious event is the separation from his long-time friend Cody, a gay man, who is now in a mental hospital after having lost his father during the Pentagon attack the year before. In the midst of this personal turmoil, Craig meets Lio, a person who is also gay and faces conflicts of his own; Lio and his twin battled cancer at a young age, but only Lio survived. Craig and Lio work at building their relationship as the community reels from the random sniper shootings and as fear spreads everywhere, especially among young people. These characters are multidimensional, as their feelings, emotions, and reactions to others differ depending upon the conflict.

Sprout in Dale Peck's *Sprout* (2009) is another example of a complex character trying to cope with a serious life issue—the death of a parent. After his mother dies, 12-year-old Sprout and his grieving father leave their New York City home and move to a rural Kansas town. Over the next four years, Sprout's father

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deals with his grief through alcohol, and Sprout dyes his hair green and contends with being alone and having no friends. Yet, in the midst of a dysfunctional family environment and the pressures of school, Sprout finds love in an unforeseen neighbor, a love that both excites and puzzles him.

Survival is another critical life issue and serious conflict faced by multidimensional characters in two

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of the books, *Money Boy* (Yee, 2011) and *Freaks and Revelations* (Hurwin, 2009). In *Money Boy*, a young Chinese immigrant, Ray Liu, struggles not only with learning the English language, but also with his strict, domineering father, a war veteran. With average grades, an interest in playing computer war games, and little ambition to appease his father by pursuing a career in

medicine, Ray also wonders how to admit to his father that he is gay. When his father accidentally finds out, he kicks Ray out of the house. Now homeless and penniless, Ray learns the grim and gritty reality of life on the streets. Ray is a complex, multidimensional character facing difficult and even life-threatening situations that evoke a range of strong emotions. At the beginning of the book, he is unconcerned about school and fairly laid back, but he undergoes a complete change in mindset once he realizes the dangers and challenges of living on the streets. Similar events occur to Jason in Hurwin's *Freaks and Revelations* when after finding out that he is gay, his mother kicks him out of the house, forcing him to live on the streets as a prostitute. Jason's situation becomes even more tragic when he is brutally attacked by a neo-Nazi teen. Only years later do these two characters happen to meet again and discover that both are open to forgiveness.

Pursuit of personal goals. An important consideration in some of the books is the protagonists' strong desire to pursue their goals for future careers amidst the events occurring in their lives. This is clearly evident in *Better Nate Than Ever* (Federle, 2013). Nate

has a strong desire to be a stage actor. In an unprecedented move to audition for a role in the Broadway play *E.T.: The Musical*, 13-year-old Nate, with encouragement from his best friend Libby, embarks on a bus trip from his hometown of Jankburg, Pennsylvania, to New York City without telling his parents. Woven into a recounting of Nate's amusing adventures in New York City are several subplots with complicating conflicts that reveal family discord and the need for important solutions, as well as Nate's growing understanding of his own sexuality. Yet, Nate is a single-minded character hoping to achieve his goal of becoming an actor.

Another example of a character's pursuit of personal goals is seen in *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (Wright, 2011). Sixteen-year-old Carlos Duarte has wanted to be a makeup artist for as long as he can remember. Given his talents in this area, he secures a part-time job on the weekends working at a cosmetics counter in a department store, but he must also deal with a jealous and difficult boss. In addition, the conflicts in Carlos's life become more complex as family issues escalate: his sister's boyfriend is abusive and his mother loses her job. While struggling with these difficulties and challenges, Carlos finds himself attracted to a punk rocker whose intentions are unclear to Carlos.

Peer relationships. In some instances, the honored books focus on the connections between and the influence of peers. This is clearly evident in Ari and Dante's growing relationship in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) and in Craig's emerging relationship with Lio in *Gone, Gone, Gone* (Moskowitz, 2012). Peer relationships become even more complicated for 18-year-old Evan in *With or Without You* (2011) by Brian Farrey. Evan and his long-time best friend, Davis, both of whom are gay, face changes in their friendship when Davis becomes tired of being bullied and wants both of them to join a group called the Chasers. The group supposedly helps people who are gay stand up to the bullies in their lives. Evan is suspect of the group, especially when he discovers that the leader, Cicada, is HIV positive and luring others into becoming HIV positive, too. Davis becomes totally committed to the group, while Evan hides the fact from Davis that he has a boyfriend, Erik. Complicating conflicts occur in Evan's life

as he hides his relationship with Erik and tries to help Davis realize the grave consequences of his continued connection with the Chasers.

Family relationships. How families come to understand and react to LGBT family members is another important facet of characterization we found in the Stonewall books. Families' reactions range from the acceptance and support demonstrated by Dante's parents in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) to anger and disbelief as seen in Paul Yee's *Money Boy* (2011). The full range of reactions from parents is apparent in David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), a book featuring several gay characters and their partners. Avery and Ryan both have supportive parents and family members; Avery's parents even finance the gender reassignment surgeries that Avery desires. In the case of Peter and Neil, Peter's family accepts his sexual orientation, and Neil finally confronts family members who already knew but chose to skirt the issue. While Harry and Craig are found engaged in a public kissing marathon, Harry's parents and Craig's parents have different reactions. Harry's parents have always been supportive of him, but Craig never told his parents. They only find out when the kissing marathon begins—a revelation that leaves them upset and angry.

DISTINCT VARIABILITY

Three novels on the award list are noteworthy in their uniqueness. Two depict events in the lives of real people, and the other is told from an unusual and unconventional perspective.

In *Freaks and Revelations* (2009), Hurwin provides a fictional account of events that precede a devastating 1980 hate crime involving two real people, Matthew Boger and Tim Zaal. The story is told in the alternating voices of two distinctively different and complex characters: Jason, a young gay teen, and Doug, an older teen, both of whom have dysfunctional families with parents that are hard, unforgiving, and merciless. Such upbringing leads to the highly complex conflicts faced by both. By the time Jason is 14, his mother has kicked him out of the house, and he now lives on the streets as a prostitute. Seventeen-year-old Doug becomes a neo-Nazi punk rocker and drug user. After several years go by, their worlds collide one Thursday night when Doug and his neo-Nazi friends identify patrons of a nearby restaurant as

gay and then attack them as they flee. Doug is filled with hate and fueled by the drugs he has taken when he first encounters Jason; Doug soon finds himself brutally beating Jason and leaving him to die in an alley. After this unconscionable act, Jason and Doug move on with their lives and years later, as adults, find themselves once again crossing paths, but as changed individuals who understand “the devastation hate causes” and “the healing power of forgiveness and love” (p. 232).

Newman's *October Mourning* (2012) is a collection of poems forming a novel in verse that recounts the real events surrounding the brutal treatment of Matthew Shepard that led to his hate-fueled death. After being viciously beaten by two young men, Matthew was tied to a fence and left to die. Newman's writing captures the strong emotions associated with this tragedy using two techniques: different voices from multiple perspectives, and a variety of poetic structures. The different perspectives include short poems from the point of view of objects and people, such as the fence, a pistol, a witness, the bartender, and an angel. For example, the poem entitled “Witness” took the following form:

Watching in horror
Wishing he could do something
The man in the moon (Newman, 2012, p. 15)

Another perspective from the patrol officer's report goes like this:

two thin white tear tracks
one red swollen blood-caked face
This is someone's child (Newman, 2012, p. 24)

The other unique book with multidimensional characters and complex conflicts, *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) by David Levithan, is told from the perspective of those from a previous generation. The narrators of this story are men who died from AIDS and who now recount what is currently going on in the lives of several young gay adolescents, providing the reader with insights into the feelings, emotions, motivations, and uncertainties of the characters. Peter and Neil have been in a comfortable, positive relationship for at least a year, and Avery and Ryan, who have just met, make earnest efforts to get to know each other. Harry and Craig are no longer together, but they decide to break the world's record for the longest kiss. Then there is very lonely Cooper, who has difficulty trying to make

sense of his life. The omniscient narrators add a layer of complexity to the portrayal of these characters' stories.

Nonfiction Books

The two nonfiction books that won Stonewall Book Honor Awards present different types of nonfiction while depicting critical events in the lives of LGBT people at different points in history: one is a chronol-

ogy highlighting the life and times of homosexuals in the United States; the other is a documentary of the treatment of homosexuals in Germany during World War II. Both books provide opportunities for young adult readers to gain historical perspective that can provide insights into the present LGBT climate in our nation and larger society.

The nonfiction book *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Settington, 2013)

takes us to Hitler's Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, a time when gay people were persecuted and defiled in much the same way as were members of the Jewish population. Many found themselves in concentration camps and identified by a pink triangle sewn on their shirts. Settington describes the horrific accounts of life for homosexuals in the concentration camps, as well as the dreadful and troublesome conditions that existed when the war ended.

In *Gay in America: A Struggle for Equality* (2008), Alsenas chronicles the history of homosexuals in this country from the 1800s to the present day. Using personal stories and real photographs, the author provides a rich description of the mercurial attitude of society's acceptance and tolerance of homosexuals through the decades. Embedded in these descriptions is the growing power of gay rights as LGBT people continue to fight for equality today.

A Close Look at One Award Winning Book

We take a close look at one more book that is representative of the quality and potential impact of the

Stonewall Book Awards recipients for children and young adult literature. A 2014 book award winner, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Cronn-Mills, 2012) illustrates the positive influence one individual can have over many others. The book tells the story of a high school senior, Gabe, who knows that he is a boy born in a girl's body. His strengths lie in his acceptance of his authentic self as being transgender and in his determination to pursue his interest in music. With his senior year coming to a close, Gabe finds satisfaction in his work as a DJ on a late-night shift at a radio station. At the same time, he struggles with his romantic feelings toward his long-time best friend Paige, the awkward family dynamics that result as his parents and brother come to terms with his transgender identity, and the troubling and threatening danger that ensues when students at school find out about his sexuality.

Gabe's multifaceted character is cleverly revealed in Cronn-Mills's use of the analogy of old 45 records to describe how Gabe views himself:

When you think about it, I'm like a 45. Liz is my A side, the song everybody knows, and Gabe is my B side—not played as often but just as good. When 45s were around, most DJs didn't care about B sides, but some were big hits: The Smiths' "How Soon Is Now" and U2's "The Sweetest Thing," for example. We don't have B sides anymore, since digital music wiped them out, but digital's not for me. I'm analog, Wall of Sound, old school to the core, and it's time to let my B side play. My radio show is a deep new groove on it. (p. 10)

This description evokes strong imagery to help readers come to understand Gabe and his stance in the world. We see him as a multifaceted character who is courageous and determined to be true to his authentic self.

Cronn-Mills insightfully extends this analogy to Gabe's performance as the DJ on the late-night radio program where he comments that ". . . life is just programmed chaos. Everybody starts out one side—that's the programmed part. Then chaos happens and our album flips. We get fat or thin, or dye our hair and pierce our nose. But those are just our outsides. Our insides are still beautiful, even if we think we are ugly children" (p. 42). As a disk jockey, Gabe gains an audience of followers who dub themselves as the Ugly Children Brigade and who ultimately play an important role in Gabe's life. What makes this story so poignant is the fact that Gabe's efforts to be himself, his honoring of his B side, become such a powerful

influence on others who also want to be themselves, despite the reasons they may have for feeling oppressed or silenced. Gabe represents how one person can have a positive effect on others in a community. This thematic message affirms the recognition this book has received.

Final Thoughts

Our analysis of the Stonewall Book Awards recipients contributes to what we know about children's and young adult books with LGBT characters in several ways. First, we found variety in genre and text format that is encouraging. It is important that books with a focus on LGBT characters are found not only in conventional realistic fiction, but also in novels in verse, graphic novels, picturebooks, and nonfiction. Such diversity in genre and format can reach a wider audience.

Second, the Stonewall Book Awards recipients over the first five years of the award (2009–2014) portray many LGBT characters in memorable and positive roles, similar to what Cole (2009) reported about the books published in the nineties. Most are portrayed not as victims, but rather as adolescents finding their place in the world. Many exude self-confidence about their authentic selves while confronting major issues in their lives.

Both the Stonewall fiction and nonfiction books provide hope and optimism as evidenced by the many positive resolutions we noted across the winning and honor titles. The fictionalized characters in the novels, as well as the stories of real people in the nonfiction books, display realistic efforts of characters and people trying to forge meaningful relationships with others. Such efforts lead to much-needed hopeful endings in many of the books. We believe that young adult readers need and deserve satisfying endings to realistic novels with LGBT characters, as well as the promising words in nonfiction books that document the lives of real people who identify themselves as LGBT. Furthermore, we agree with Lo (2011), who argues that young adult books offer an avenue for creating positive change that challenges deeply embedded views of homophobia. Emotional involvement with characters in books can bring about a greater awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the lives of others.

Finally, this narrative analysis of the Stonewall award winners and honor books stands as evidence

of the changes that are slowly, but steadily, occurring in our wider society. Respect for individual differences, especially for differences in sexual orientation, has and is gaining momentum, and this momentum is beginning to be reflected in young adult literature in diverse and positive ways.

Nonetheless, more progress is needed before

LGBT adolescents can find multiple role models in books. While there are some gay characters, there are few stories about lesbians or transgender teens or LGBT teenagers of color. Because books with LGBT content provide an opportunity for young people to envision possibilities and to think about strategies that might or might not work for them, we need many more high-quality books that feature a wide range of adolescents in a wide variety of realistic situations. We agree with Bond (2011) that “perhaps having available books which present positive characters with diverse sexual orientations will allow more young

adults to find themselves in literature, while providing counter-images to the stereotypes too often found in popular media” (p. 275). Similarly, our work supports Cart and Jenkins's (2015) claim that:

as we began the second decade of the twenty-first century, LGBTQ YA books remained a literature in transition. Despite the many gains in the field, further advances are still needed. For example, too many titles, especially those that remain focused on coming out, continue to treat homosexual or transgender as a problem or issue. Similarly, there are too few novels that feature characters whose LGBTQ identity is simply a given, as it is in stories about heterosexual characters. And in that same vein, few novels acknowledge that homosexuality encompasses more than the sex act, that love is also part of the equation. (pp. xiii–xiv)

The Stonewall books can play a role in helping all young adults learn about and understand people who are LGBT and become allies and supportive friends.

Because books with LGBT content provide an opportunity for young people to envision possibilities and to think about strategies that might or might not work for them, we need many more high-quality books that feature a wide range of adolescents in a wide variety of realistic situations.

Given that the serious life issues that are dealt with in the books affect students from all walks of life, young people might see connections between themselves and their LGBT peers that they hadn't imagined. For example, in *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (Wright, 2011), Carlos's desire to become a famous make-up artist is contrasted with the problems of his mother losing her job and his sister's abusive relationship. As Carlos tries to figure out how to support his mother and his sister, he begins to use his ability to maneuver through complex social and cultural situations, eventually leading to positive outcomes.

We also believe that we need more stories of real-life individuals and how they deal and/or dealt with their identities and life circumstances. For this reason, *Gay in America: A Struggle for Equality* (Alsenas, 2008) is important. As Alsenas chronicles the history of homosexuals in this country from the 1800s to the present day, the stories of people who lived lives that were once invisible become visible. We also need more informational books that portray the complexity and diversity of LGBT people around the world. Then perhaps we can begin to change the dismal statistics around suicide among people who are LGBT (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013) and the lack of support that so many LGBT students feel in their schools. These books, in conjunction with LGBT-positive curricula, can help schools become safer places where all young adults can thrive and experience well being and success. The right book in the hands of the right student at the right time can make a difference.

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