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Advocacy, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Expression:

A Collaborative Conversation

***From the Editors*:** In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation among four authors who work to fight discrimination in their books and in their lives, particularly surrounding issues of sexual and gender identity and expression. We greatly appreciate these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to participate so honestly and thoughtfully in this important conversation.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to each author. We compiled the responses into a single document and then sent the compiled version back and forth to authors to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the resulting piece. We hope you appreciate and learn from the wisdom they share.

What challenges come with writing about gender identity?

Bill: For me, writing about gender identity as it is understood today makes me feel old. My understanding of what the battles were regarding gender identity is dated. Back when I was being a radical, artistic teenager, my understanding was that we were trying to expand the definitions of what it meant to be male or female. I grew up with *Free to Be . . . You and Me* (Thomas, 1974), which was all about the fact that boys can play with dolls, and girls can do whatever they please. A boy loving another boy back when I was a teenager in the 1980s was far outside the accepted range of male gender identity, to the point that my biology teacher was openly saying things like "Gay is subnormal" and not getting in trouble at all. So really what's happened is the battle lines have shifted. Now being cisgender and gay is more or less accepted as a variance of male gender identity, but gender fluidity and being transgender are the areas where we need to fight. So my biggest challenge is to not only understand what the battle currently is, but to internalize this new understanding so I can authentically write characters who are struggling in a modern way with gender identity.

Ami: Gender identity is a complex concept, and it differs from person to person, so I think it's important to point out that I didn't write about gender identity; I wrote about one person—Grayson—who struggles to express herself as the female that she is. One challenge is to help readers understand that the concept of gender identity is broad and complex, and no author, in creating one character, can address the broad scope of gender identity. In the publishing world, we often hear that if you're going to write about a marginalized group, especially if you're not a member of that group, you have to "get it right." This is absolutely true. But just as there are many ways in which to "get it wrong," there are many ways in which to "get it right."

Sara: One of the greatest challenges for me was writing about gender identity from a different cultural context. My debut, *If You Could Be Mine* (2013),

was not set in a western culture, and it *was* set in a country where there are highly specific rules and laws about the subject matter. When that novel came out, I was very anxious about whether I was writing something problematic, not only because I was not born and raised in Iran, but also because I am cisgender and had trans characters in my story. I worried a great deal that I did not have the authority to write characters that may misrepresent a community. When I am asked about books to recommend on this subject and others, I respond with books by authors who are writing from a point of view they identify with. *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo (2016), for example, is a wonderful book and reads as authentic and true.

Alex: I don't think all gender identities are hard to write about. Authors with cisgender, heteronormative characters have a culture's worth of references and external cues to rely on. It's when the character is outside the norm that the author needs to subtly educate readers while connecting with them. With transgender and other marginalized identities, it becomes a balance between respecting the characters and making sure the reader is with you—all that without being pedantic and with language that is rapidly morphing and developing. And since there are so few models out there, there's a heightened need to get it right while also acknowledging that there's no one way to be trans or gender nonconforming. Oh, and write a good and engaging story while you're at it.

Is there an overlap between your own life and the lives you create on the page?

Ami: Definitely. While I'm cisgender and Grayson is transgender, she's very much like I was as a sixth grader—shy, introverted, and naturally inclined to deflect attention. I wish I had come out of my shell when I was Grayson's age. Grayson's experience as someone who feels "other" because of her gender identity overlaps with the experiences of some people I'm close to, but I would never publicize their stories.

Sara: While my books are fiction and the characters have very different experiences than I do, the voices of the main characters sound very much like mine. I am also writing about things that I struggled with in my own adolescence. I am Persian and gay, and my first two books delve into both of those identities. In my future work, I will continue to write about facets of my identity, I will continue to write about things that I find unfair, and even when I have a main character who is physically different from me, the character will still have a lot of my voice.

Alex: I would agree and say of course there is an overlap between my life and the lives of my characters. I think this is true for all writers, though maybe not in the ways some people would expect. For example, what I have most in common with Melissa, the transgender main character of my middle grade novel *George* (2015) is that we both love *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952). The character I connect with more in how she sees the world is the cisgender, heterosexual main character of my work-in-progress. But my life surely impacts the lives I write about, and just like my characters, I'm trying to figure out how to connect with people and what it means both to be yourself and to be there for others.

Bill: I suppose there's always an overlap between my own world and the one I create on the page, hard as I might try sometimes to erase it. I've written a lot of "my" stories already, and that means I'm now branching out into stories that aren't exactly mine. When Toby comes out as gender fluid in *Honestly Ben* (2017), I have to translate a lot, because I didn't as a young person consider myself gender fluid; my coming out was about sexual orientation. So as I write more, the overlap becomes less.

Do you consider yourself an advocate for the right to gender expression? Are there certain responsibilities and/or risks that come with such advocacy efforts?

Alex: I do, both in my writing and in the way I live my life as a femme genderqueer person. I think that comes with a responsibility to be honest—not sugar coating, not demonizing, but being compassionately honest. It's also important to be aware of

intersectionality and how realities like race, class, gender, and disability all affect our stories. There are probably risks involved, but what I see is the risk I take when I don't speak up—the risk that kids who need an advocate don't have one.

Sara: I do, as well, but I don't think I do enough or am vocal enough on social media or as an activist. When I give talks, make appearances, do school visits, or am asked to do an interview, I always make sure that I am welcome and that the audience is familiar with the subjects I write about. This is done selfishly on my part, as I do want to be in a safe environment, but I also believe that as we go forward, all people must do what they can to advocate for what they believe is right. There is no longer any room to stay quiet in hopes of being liked or made to feel comfortable. I hope that the stories I write help others in some way, but without the efforts of teachers, librarians, students, and other activists to foster discussion, awareness, and advocacy work, those stories are just stories.

Bill: I consider myself an advocate for all people who are searching for their own authenticity. And that is absolutely the case for people who are trying to figure out their own gender expression. Especially the case for those people. I think the responsibility that is most important to me is to get it right, as Ami mentioned earlier. Especially if and when I am telling a "not-me" story, I need to inhabit that character truthfully and authentically, and that's a big responsibility.

Ami: When I wrote *Gracefully Grayson* (2014), I didn't see myself as an advocate; I simply felt that I was telling a story that needed to be told. In retrospect, I think this was overly simplistic of me. Anyone who writes a story about someone who could potentially experience discrimination because of that person's identity becomes an advocate. So yes, now I'm comfortable saying I'm an advocate. Because I'm cisgender and unwilling to reveal the real-life inspiration for Grayson's character (since publicizing someone else's personal story is not my right), I walk a fine line. It's important for me to advocate, but I tend to do so through allying myself with those who are comfortable and open sharing their own personal stories with the world.

In my "other life," I'm a sixth-grade English teacher and a mom. I feel very comfortable advocating for the right to gender expression through these roles. Many of my conversations with my students and my own children center around putting ourselves in others' shoes and seeking, first and foremost, to understand where others are coming from. There are huge responsibilities that come with this role; I feel that I'm no longer allowed to keep quiet when I notice injustice, and speaking up always carries with it an inherent risk. People will disagree, people will get angry, but people will also agree, be grateful, and evolve.

How would you respond to people who say your books are inappropriate for the classroom setting?

Sara: Very calmly—but I would ask about what books they find appropriate for the classroom and why. If you make young people feel that issues of sexuality or gender identity are shameful, you are fostering a sense of shame not only with students who identify with or support the LGBTQ community, but also with some students who are straight and cis who will take that shame as validation of their continuing prejudice. I understand that teachers are not always supported in ways they should be and that many communities will grapple with reading materials for their young people, but we have to ask ourselves, do we want to live in a world that is inclusive and educated or a world that is exclusive and misinformed?

Alex: It is never inappropriate to be compassionate. My book, with a trans main character, will not make anyone trans. However, it can make people trans-aware. Cisgender children who grow up seeing the humanity in others will become adults who respect the people they meet. Transgender representation in children's and YA literature can also provide needed support for kids who were already themselves long before they touched my book. What is damaging is hiding information. Hiding leads to shame and ignorance. The path of ignorance is close-minded and hostile, and the road back from shame is long and hard.

Ami: I would speak to the perceived risks and clear benefits of promoting books about children who aren't cisgender. What risk is involved, for example, when a child reads *Gracefully Grayson*? Through my many conversations with teachers, administrators, school social workers, child psychologists, and children about this very issue, what often comes up is that adults are afraid that a child who reads about others' journeys to express their gender identity will suddenly believe that they, too, are not exploring and/or expressing their true gender identity. This is nonsensical. No individual who is cisgender is going to suddenly become transgender, just like nobody who is transgender will become cisgender. If a book gives children the courage to show the world who they are, have always been, and always will be, that is a beautiful thing. The benefits to reading about people who are transgender are vast, both for transgender and cisgender children and young people. Transgender kids see characters with struggles and triumphs that might be similar to their own, and cisgender kids learn to sympathize with others' difficulties, celebrate others' joys, and learn to look for commonalities between themselves and other people who might, on the surface, appear different from them. This is the case when we read any novel. It's a win-win.

Bill: I just don't understand what "inappropriate" means in this context, I guess. I mean, we wouldn't want to share pornography or gratuitous violence in the classroom, but when we are talking about writing that offers a mirror or window into another character's life, who gets to choose which character's mirrors/windows are appropriate?

For whom do you write?

Bill: I'm not sure how to answer this. I write for anyone who feels a little left-of-center, a little square peg-ish. I definitely don't want to focus on my audience while I'm writing, as it hurts the process, but if we're talking about who I expect/intend to reach, it's people who are searching for where and how they fit into this crazy world of ours.

Ami: As I was writing *Gracefully Grayson*, I would have answered that I write for my own personal growth and enjoyment and for middle grade readers. Since *Gracefully Grayson* was published and I learned more about the publishing world, I've become less idealistic. Every day, though, I remind myself to think about and write for the kids who will one day be reading my words—the kids who feel different, the kids who can't yet empathize, and the kids looking for a good story. In the end, they're the readers that matter most.

Sara: I began writing to make myself feel better. What has been incredibly rewarding in my books (which I thought would never be published) is that while I felt very alone when writing them, since publication, I have met so many different people of all ages, races, sexual orientations, nationalities, and gender identities who have read my work and have connected to it in some way. I write for young people of all backgrounds, but I am mostly writing stories I wish I had had when I was younger to better equip me for a world that might not always accept me as I am.

Alex: I write for kids. It's as simple as that. My first book was a book with both a trans main character and a trans theme, but it was never meant to be just for trans kids. The stories I write are about being different in a world of difference. They are about friendship and connection. They are about finding our places in the world.

Sara Farizan *is the author of* If You Could Be Mine *and* Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel. *She resides in Massachusetts.*

Alex Gino *loves glitter, ice cream, gardening, awe-ful puns, and stories that reflect the diversity and complexity of being alive. They would take a quiet coffee date with a friend over a loud and crowded party any day. Born and raised on Staten Island, NY, Alex has lived in Philadelphia, PA; Brooklyn, NY; Astoria (Queens), NY; Northampton, MA; and Oakland, CA. In April 2016, they put their books and furniture in storage and moved into an RV and are currently driving around the country, happily watching the landscape change.* George *is Alex's debut novel. When they started writing it in 2003, they had no idea how long a journey it would be, but the hole in children's literature was clear. After countless revisions, breaks of frustration, and days spent staring at drafts willing them*

to be better, Alex is delighted and proud to share Melissa's story with the world.

Bill Konigsberg *is the award-winning young adult author of four novels.* The Porcupine of Truth *won the PEN Center USA Literary Award and the Stonewall Book Award in 2016.* Openly Straight *won the Sid Fleischman Award for Humor and was a finalist for the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award and Lambda Literary Award in 2014. His debut novel,* Out of the Pocket*, won the Lambda Literary Award in 2009. His most recent novel,* Honestly Ben*, received three starred reviews from* Publisher's Weekly*,* Booklist*, and* School Library Journal*. Bill is an Assistant Professor of Practice at The Piper Center for Creative Writing at Arizona State University, where he coordinates and teaches in the Your Novel Year online certificate program. He lives in Chandler, Arizona, with his husband, Chuck, and their Australian Labradoodles, Mabel and Buford.*

Ami Polonsky*, author of* Gracefully Grayson *(an ALA Rainbow List Top Ten Selection, 2016, and a Goodreads Top 100 Children's Books title) and* Threads *(a Winter Indie Next Pick) is also a 6th-grade English teacher at Lake Forest Country Day School in Illinois. She is grateful for all the goofy children in her life and the writing ideas they give her. She works hard (usually unsuccessfully) to juggle teaching, her family, and her writing career. She is devoted to equity, openness, love, chocolate, and dogs. Learn more at www.amipolonsky.com.*

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