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Fear of the Other: Exploring LGBT Themes in YA Contemporary Realistic Fiction

Adolescence is a time of discovering self-awareness for many, and it is the time that many young adults seek to carve out individual identity. Increasingly, sexual preference is becoming accepted as one of the questions of young adulthood, and this theme is being represented more in young adult literature every year. Members of the LGBT community have had profound impact on me, and with the recent controversy over the issue of same-sex marriage, I believe that the only way to encourage members of the community in the future is through educating the next generation of voters. The LGBT community is subject to a heinous amount of discrimination and violence, and it is my belief that if literature on this subject is introduced to teens (and even to children), it can allow them to develop a more understanding view of things that they might not understand. It is my hope that through books like the ones that I am sharing in my bibliography, teens questioning their sexuality or finding themselves in a position that goes against the status quo will find solace in the fact that they are not alone, and teens struggling to understand or accept them will find a way to be supportive of their peers.

Today, programs such as the Lambda Literary Foundation's LGBT Writers in Schools seek to bring awareness to this topic in literature by providing young adult LGBT literature in a book club format in schools. At the end of a unit of study on the book, students have the opportunity to interact with the author via Skype for discussion.

The books that I have chosen to include in my annotated bibliography cover a variety of sub-genres within contemporary realistic fiction in hopes that teens will find at least one book of interest on the topic. I have attempted to draw a cross section of the LGBT share of young adult literature, with a fair proportion of each represented. Unfortunately, bisexual representation in young adult literature is still severely lacking. Young adult author Malinda Lo writes in her blog:

There are so many awful stereotypes about bisexuals as promiscuous, deceptive, or just plain confused. Sometimes the very existence of bisexuals is challenged by lesbians or gay men (“bisexual is just one step on the way to gay”). Sometimes queer folks feel threatened by bisexuals because they fear their bisexual lovers will leave them for a straight relationship. And then there’s the extreme sexualization of bisexual women on the part of so much mainstream heteronormative media. All of these stereotypes are messed up, and they are distinct to bisexuals. (Lo)

While an increasing number of young adult realistic fiction novels deal with lesbian, gay, and even transgendered characters, bisexuality is still often seen as either taboo or a social construct, as Lo comments. I would be failing the purpose of this blog posting by Lo, however, if I failed to mention that she has written two books in which bisexual characters are prominently featured (*Adaptation* and *Inheritance*) – they are not included in my bibliography due to the fact that they fall under the genre of science fiction. In the Fall 2011/Winter 2012 issue of the *SIGNAL Journal*, B.J. Epstein echoes her sentiment, stating that “bisexual characters are even more absent than transgender ones and the portrayal of bisexuality is actually more negative than that of transsexuality” (Epstein 25). For this reason, I was unable to find any books to include in my bibliography specifically dealing with bisexual characters.

I am proud of the selection of contemporary realistic fiction books that I have found, and I feel that they represent significant pieces of the teen LGBT community, as well as strong teaching tools. Any of these books would make strong pieces to study in some form of LGBT unit, or a unit on diversity, identity, the other, or bullying. This topic is powerful to me, and the causes of equality and education in this area have been a passion of mine for quite some time now. It is a dream of mine to see this taught in schools without question or fear of whether it is a taboo subject.

Annotated Bibliography

Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: Pocket, 1999. Print. Charlie, a high school freshman whose best friend has just committed suicide, is taken under the wing of two seniors. He learns about life, love, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* from Patrick and Sam. This book is significant for its contribution to young adult LGBT literature because while homosexuality is not the prominent motif of the book, it does play an important role, and the relations between straight and gay characters do pose some conflict and raise questions about bullying and gay identity. This book touches base on serious issues that include rape, suicide, abuse, and drug use among others, but while it is edgy as far as subject matter, it generally condemns negative behavior and has been a teen favorite for nearly fifteen years.

Danforth, Emily M. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. New York: Balzer + Bray, 2012. Print. "Cameron Post feels a mix of guilt and relief when her parents die in a car accident. Their deaths mean they will never learn the truth she eventually comes to—that she's gay. Orphaned, Cameron comes to live with her old-fashioned grandmother and ultraconservative aunt Ruth. There she falls in love with her best friend, a beautiful cowgirl. When she's eventually outed, her aunt sends her to God's Promise, a religious conversion camp that is supposed to 'cure' her homosexuality. At the camp, Cameron comes face to face with the cost of denying her true identity" (Amazon.com). This book tackles the balance between conservative religion and homosexuality, which can be a difficult path to follow. This might be a good read for teens who are unable to understand homosexuality due to their understanding of their own religion, as well as teens who struggle to even discuss the topic due to a conservative upbringing.

Garden, Nancy. *Annie on My Mind*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982. Print. "This groundbreaking book is the story of two teenage girls whose friendship blossoms into love and who, despite pressures from family and school that threaten their relationship, promise to be true to each other and their feelings. This book is so truthful and honest, it has been banned from many school libraries and even publicly burned in Kansas City" (Goodreads.com). The landmark novel of the lesbian canon, this book has moved readers of all sexual preferences. In addition, it features characters of different backgrounds, with both class differences and varied ethnicities represented. The lack of ethnic diversity is often noted as a pitfall of LGBT literature, so this might be a good suggestion for teens whose families are recent immigrants.

Katcher, Brian. *Almost Perfect*. New York: Delacorte for Young Readers, 2009. Print. "Logan Witherspoon recently discovered that his girlfriend of three years cheated on him. But things start to look up when a new student breezes through the halls of his small-town high school. Sage Hendricks befriends Logan at a time when he no longer trusts or believes in people. Sage has been homeschooled for a number of years and her parents have forbidden her to date anyone, but she won't tell Logan why. One day, Logan acts on his growing feelings for Sage. Moments later, he wishes he never had. Sage finally discloses her big secret: she's actually a boy. Enraged, frightened, and feeling betrayed, Logan lashes out at Sage and disowns her. But once Logan comes to terms with what happened, he reaches out to Sage in an attempt to understand her situation. But Logan has no idea how rocky the road back to friendship will be" (Goodreads.com). This book is the first among the list to focus on a transgender teen. This is probably the trickiest component of LGBT to discuss, as it comes with preconceived notions. This book gives insight into the turmoil that trans

teens often must endure just to be accepted by their peers. It would make a strong read in a unit on identity or diversity as a means of helping to teach acceptance.

King, A. S. *Ask the Passengers*. New York: Little, Brown, 2012. Print. "Astrid Jones copes with her small town's gossip and narrow-mindedness by staring at the sky and imagining that she's sending love to the passengers in the airplanes flying high over her backyard. Maybe they'll know what to do with it. Maybe it'll make them happy. Maybe they'll need it. Her mother doesn't want it, her father's always stoned, her perfect sister's too busy trying to fit in, and the people in her small town would never allow her to love the person she really wants to: another girl named Dee. There's no one Astrid feels she can talk to about this deep secret or the profound questions that she's trying to answer. But little does she know just how much sending her love--and asking the right questions--will affect the passengers' lives, and her own, for the better" (provided by publisher). Astrid comes from a dysfunctional family. This is a topic that can bridge the gap to many teens who might not understand the issues of the LGBT community. In addition, Astrid comes from a conservative town, and feels that she has to stay in the closet or the repercussions will be massive. This is the classic story of teenage sexual awakening that goes against the status quo. The fear of coming out is a topic that is highly prevalent in LGBT literature, especially for young adults, and it is certainly one that can help teens to learn acceptance by understanding what is going on in the character's mind. This is also the closest a character on this list comes to identifying herself as bisexual.

Konigsberg, Bill. *Out of the Pocket*. New York, NY: Dutton, 2008. Print. "Star quarterback Bobby Framingham, one of the most talented high school football players in California, knows he's different from his teammates. They're like brothers, but they don't know one

essential thing: Bobby is gay. Can he still be one of the guys and be honest about who he is? When he's outed against his will by a student reporter, Bobby must find a way to earn back his teammates' trust and accept that his path to success might be more public, and more difficult, than he'd hoped" (Goodreads.com). A book about both sports and the fear of coming out, this book might appeal to teens with an interest in sports. The football commentary is well-written, and this book was the recipient of the 2009 Lambda Literary Award in the Young Adult Category. This would be a prime candidate for teaching to teens who might harbor resentment toward a gay peer for not fitting the status quo. It can also easily be tied in to current news stories about athletes at both college and professional levels coming out.

Peters, Julie Anne. *Keeping You a Secret*. New York: Little, Brown, 2003. Print. "With a steady boyfriend, the position of Student Council President, and a chance to go to an Ivy League college, high school life is just fine for Holland Jaeger. At least it seems to be. But when Cece Goddard comes to school, everything changes. Cece and Holland have undeniable feelings for each other, but how will others react to their developing relationship?" (Goodreads.com). This book deals with the issue of blended families, which is another topic not too often represented in LGBT literature. Holland also faces the struggle of questioning her sexuality while in a steady relationship, which might be difficult for many teens to understand. Holland's character also is written with many realistic virtues and flaws, and this book is a relatively quick read.

Peters, Julie Anne. *Luna*. New York: Little, Brown, 2004. Print. "Regan's brother Liam can't stand the person he is during the day. Like the moon from whom Liam has chosen his female namesake, his true self, Luna, only reveals herself at night. In the secrecy of his

basement bedroom Liam transforms himself into the beautiful girl he longs to be, with help from his sister's clothes and makeup. Now, everything is about to change-Luna is preparing to emerge from her cocoon. But are Liam's family and friends ready to welcome Luna into their lives? Compelling and provocative, this is an unforgettable novel about a transgender teen's struggle for self-identity and acceptance" (Goodreads.com). Viewed as the landmark transgender piece of the young adult LGBT canon, *Luna* takes on a difficult subject. It is told from the point of view of Luna's sister, which offers a safe third party perspective for teens who might be unwilling to read from the point of view of such a different and unfamiliar character. It is a strong teaching tool about major areas of concern for the trans community, including physical transition.

Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. New York:

Simon & Schuster BFYR, 2012. Print. Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza has no friends, his siblings are much older than him, his parents are a mystery, and his older brother is in prison. Enter Dante Quintana, a boy his own age from the private school he loves to hate. Dante teaches him to swim and becomes his first real friend. Then, one rainy day, Dante is almost hit by a car. Ari saves his life and suddenly, everything Ari thinks he knows becomes more confusing than ever. The novel follows the pair on a journey of teenage wisdom and questionable decisions, ultimately leading Ari to discover his true self. This book was the launching point for my research into this topic, and I highly recommend it. It deals with Mexican-American teens, questioning sexuality, and the ruthless bullying that members of the LGBT community are too often subject to. This book is an excellent teaching tool on topics of diversity, identity, isolation, and bullying, among others.

Sanchez, Alex. *The God Box*. New York: Simon & Schuster for Young Readers, 2007. Print.

"*The God Box* offers [an] 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" (Hayn, *The ALAN Review*). This book examines the conflict between religion and homosexuality, as well as the conflict of questioning sexuality while in a committed relationship. Teens from religious backgrounds will certainly find something to which they can relate in this book, especially since the author uses Biblical references to develop the story. The message of this story is a strong one in terms of religion, and that is that the Bible teaches love.

Wilson, Martin. *What They Always Tell Us*. New York: Delacorte, 2008. Print. "James and Alex have barely anything in common anymore—least of all their experiences in high school, where James is a popular senior and Alex is suddenly an outcast. But at home, there is Henry, the precocious 10-year-old across the street, who eagerly befriends them both. And when Alex takes up running, there is James's friend Nathen, who unites the brothers in moving and unexpected ways" (Goodreads.com). This book puts homosexuality into perspective as simply one part of Alex's life instead of the focus of the conflict. This is refreshing in a sea of coming out stories which still dominate the market. This is another book that deals with sports, which might appeal to teens with interest in that area.

Wittlinger, Ellen. *Parrotfish*. New York: Simon & Schuster for Young Readers, 2007. Print.

"Angela Katz-McNair has never felt quite right as a girl. Her whole life is leading up to the day she decides to become Grady, a guy. While coming out as transgendered feels right to Grady, he isn't prepared for the reaction he gets from everyone else. His mother is upset,

his younger sister is mortified, and his best friend, Eve, won't acknowledge him in public. Why can't people just let Grady be himself?" (Goodreads.com). The only female-to-male transgender character on this list, Grady represents a minority within a minority. The plot is generally optimistic on the subject, and Grady is portrayed as a sympathetic character. It is strong mostly in terms of education on trans issues, and it can be used as a teaching tool for topics of bullying, identity, and self-acceptance.

Recommended for further reading from other genres:

Bauer, Marion Dane. *Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. Print. A collection of short stories from a variety of genres, this book is an excellent resource for teens who are feeling excluded or are in a state of questioning their sexuality. It features works from several prominent young adult authors.

Block, Francesca Lia. *Weetzie Bat*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989. Print. This book brings up topics like gay marriage, AIDS, abortion, and children out of wedlock. It is likely too controversial to present in a school setting without a good deal of dissension, and is probably not appropriate for all students. The genre it is written in is speculative fiction, and magical realism makes the city of Los Angeles (referred to as "Shangri-LA") come to life in vivid color.

Levithan, David. *The Realm of Possibility*. New York: Knopf, 2004. Print. A series of connected monologues in mixed genres, this book tells the stories of twenty teenagers. Many of the stories deal with interpersonal relationships and angst, including LGBT relationships and attractions.

Newman, Lesléa. *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*. Somerville, MA:

Candlewick, 2012. Print. This series of poems details the events of the killing of gay teen Matthew Shepard from several perspectives. It is a moving collection that can be used in a number of ways. A powerful experience for its use could be inclusion in a reader's theatre setting.

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