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Teaching Gay/Lesbian Young Adult Texts

Denise Jacobs

Perspective: Myths, Biases, and Stereotypes

Once upon a time, I read as a heterosexual who knew herself to be interested in women on a multitude of levels but had not yet given that interest a name, had not fastened a bisexual label upon her lapel. As that reader, the troubled personal backgrounds and painful journeys gay and lesbian characters endured in both the process of identifying themselves as gay or lesbian troubled me. This may well be more than you want to know about me, but I hope it makes the point that life experience affects how we read, much in the same way an author's life experience affects the ways in which she writes.

The literary construction of homosexuality as a problem is problematic in itself because—like it or not—rightly or wrongly—when I, as a heterosexual reader, see the confusion a lesbian character like Stevie experiences in *The Cat Came Back*¹ (Mullins 1993), for example, I construct a particular homosexual experience in which a gay or lesbian character's identity struggle reinforces prevalent negative stereotypes (of homosexuals as deeply troubled individuals, for example) rather than just one character's experience. This may not be an accurate reading, but it may be your heterosexual students' reading. Heterosexual students may lack a basis in reality from whence to counter negative fictional depictions, and, while gay and lesbian readers may respond more positively to the struggles of gay/lesbian characters, heterosexual readers might find—as I did—that the gay/lesbian character's struggles

overshadow the epiphany of finding one's own voice and ultimately becoming a strong, confident individual.

If we don't want students to react negatively to the stories told in gay/lesbian texts, then we must provide a variety of well-written books with a variety of audiences. In other words, we need lots of books for lots of different readers and different occasions. We cannot afford to assume that just introducing a book with a gay or lesbian character is a good thing; we must be conscious of the messages about YA gay and lesbian characters individual books send.

Shirley Ernest argues in *Battling Dragons: Issues and Controversy in Children's Literature* that "[r]eaders may have their stereotypes and biases reinforced by what they read or they might use new information to revise their knowledge and beliefs" (76). Allan Cuseo, author of *Homosexual Characters in YA Novels: A Literary Analysis, 1969-1982*, puts a gay/lesbian spin on Ernst's statement and contends that the "use of negative myths about the homosexual character by . . . authors may reinforce the existence of those myths in the adolescent reader's mind [and] . . . [t]he homosexual character which is created by myth may shape the individual's opinion of his/her orientation" (396). Cuseo addresses the impact of negative stereotyping upon young gay and lesbian readers, not heterosexual readers. In fact, the perpetuation of negative myths has a twofold effect—one upon a straight audience and another upon a gay audience. Multicultural educators know that one of the criteria used in evaluating multicultural children's literature is

whether a book is written for the children of the culture or is written for the dominant culture in an attempt to explain or justify the culture reflected. I am not suggesting that authors of gay/lesbian YA texts tailor their writing to heterosexuals, but I am suggesting that we consider the potential effect of introducing diverse texts upon multiple audiences, in this case, gay and straight, sympathetic and unsympathetic.

If our differences are to be unifying, that is, if the introduction of diverse texts in the classroom setting is to do other than reinforce the incorrect notion that we somehow are different rather than having differences, we must be purposeful about how we address those differences . . .

As educators, we want to create the kinds of classrooms in which diversity can be celebrated and understanding is fostered. If our differences are to be unifying, that is, if the introduction of diverse texts in the classroom setting is to do other than reinforce the incorrect notion that we somehow are different rather than having differences, we must be purposeful about how we address those differences, which means we must recognize, for one thing, that the gay/lesbian texts we introduce will likely have a predominantly heterosexual audience. Where do we start?

Frances Ann Day, in her recent publication, *Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults*, an honor book for the 2001 Nonfiction Award given by the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Book Awards Committee, gives us a starting place. Day, a lesbian scholar, is able to recommend 71 YA fiction texts with gay/lesbian characters, and she does so in spite of strict selection criteria which, if adhered to, minimize the selection of texts that perpetuate negative societal myths about homosexuality and/or reinforce homosexual stereotypes.

Pedagogical Questions

If one reads enough gay/lesbian YA literature, it becomes possible to speculate with some certainty about the issues that surface in gay/lesbian texts. The following list of questions is designed to help educators determine if individual texts present homosexuality in a positive and authentic light. And, like Day's criteria, they are designed to counteract negative societal myths. A paragraph or so is devoted to each question in the section to follow.

- Are the conflicts experienced by gays and lesbians more apt to be the products of a heterosexual society than they are internal conflicts about identity?
- Is coming out an issue, and if it is, is it an issue for the straight character or for the homosexual character? In other words, who assumes the burden of the problem?
- Do the ways in which coming out occur speak to the diversity of experience among gays and lesbians?
- Are romantic relationships between homosexuals portrayed as relatively stable, that is, as stable as those of their heterosexual counterparts?
- Does the text perpetuate the myth of homosexual love as merely a phase?
- Does the text mirror romantic complications unique to gays and lesbians?
- Is it clear that gay and lesbian romantic relationships are sexually intimate—just as the romantic relationships of their heterosexual counterparts are sexually intimate?
- Are secondary gay and lesbian characters legitimate in their own right or do they serve merely as plot devices, that is, catalysts that enable straight characters to

react, grow, or evolve? In other words, do there exist gay and lesbian characters whose orientation is incidental to the plot?

- Are gay and lesbian characters well-rounded? That is, does the novel include characters whose sexual orientation is not the cornerstone of the novel's problem and characters with interests outside the realm of sexuality?
- When homophobia is present, is it countered?
- Is ethnic diversity present?
- Are long-term, role model gay and lesbian relationships evident?

Observations

In my reading of award-winning books recommended by Day, I discovered that gay and lesbian characters' struggles with identity are better understood as struggles with heterosexual stereotypes than as identity crises. While some gay and lesbian characters struggle with what it means to be homosexual and wrestle with the terminology as well as the concept, for the most part, characters have a pretty strong sense of who they are. The identity struggle for gays and lesbians is oftentimes against the stereotype and who it says they should be, not who they are.

In *Coffee Will Make You Black* (Sinclair 1994), for example, Stevie speculates about her sexual orientation when she discovers that she spends more time daydreaming about Nurse Horn than she does about her boyfriend (192, 231). Even though both Stevie and Nurse Horn are women, Stevie can't conceive of herself as gay because of its stereotypical (heterosexual) connotations. She can, however, conceive of being in love with Nurse Horn. The notion of being homosexual as opposed to loving a particular person causes a certain discordance within presumably straight characters because what they are experiencing goes against the stereotype.

In the same way that identity issues are understood as struggles with heterosexual stereotypes, coming out appears to be more of an external issue—that is, an action motivated by external circumstances as opposed to troubling internal dynamics. Fewer characters struggle with coming out (than in Cuseo's study), and that is surely a good sign and indicative of progress made in the depiction of gay/lesbian characters.

I anticipate that, in the future, coming out as an internal dilemma in which characters struggle over who they are will become less and less of an issue. I expect that more and more, if coming out is an issue at all, it will be presented as a pragmatic decision that evolves around heterosexual politics or assumptions. In the future, the conflict will center more on the heterosexual characters' responses to homosexuality, which is, after all, where it belongs.

I also discovered relatively stable romantic relationships (considering the characters are teenagers) as well as romantic complications unique to gays and lesbians. Only occasionally is there the suggestion that romance between two persons of the same gender is a phase or a temporary state of affairs—an issue that concerned both Cuseo and Day. When the phase-myth does appear, it contributes to the complexity of same-sex romances and becomes a plot device, in a sense, because it allows parents to disregard or minimize the homosexual relationship or send a son or daughter into therapy for "help" through the phase.

Along with romance are romantic complications, which mirror the real-life situations gays and lesbians encounter—things like "how to have boyfriends and girlfriends at school [and] how to introduce parents to lovers" (Lipsky 56). In general, YA literary characters deal with such romantic complications as unspoken crushes and secret affairs. Gay characters are sometimes attracted to each other but are unsure how to interpret the relationship because one or the other has not yet come out. These are genuine, real-life problems, and how they are handled speaks to the integrity of an individual text.

It is difficult to anticipate changes in the area of sexual intimacy in future gay/lesbian YA texts because the whole issue of sexuality is so controversial in the larger arena of YA literature in general. It seems likely that those who find heterosexual intimacy objectionable would find homosexual intimacy even more so. My speculation is that gay/lesbian presses like Alyson will take the forefront in publishing more sexually explicit and homoerotic literature than the conventional presses. What is at issue is whether or not gay and lesbian romances are permitted to exist—as do their heterosexual counterparts—outside the realm of puppy love and phases. In the historical context of YA gay/lesbian romance, sexuality has been denied and minimized.

More stories are needed in which gays are ordinary characters and their sexual orientation is not the theme around which a plot pivots. Nancy Garden contends that “until we get to the point where gay characters just are, we won’t be where we need to be” (Ford 27). *Annie John* (Kincaid 1985) is a great example of a gay character that “just is.” *Annie John* is simply allowed to be, as opposed to being a gay character working through the problem of her sexual identity, and she knows intuitively, at 12 years old, at the close of the first day of school, that what she knows about herself will not be acceptable to her mother:

I liked a girl named Albertine, and I liked a girl named Gweneth. At the end of the day, Gwen and I were in love, and so we walked home arm in arm together. When I got home, my mother greeted me with the customary kiss and inquiries. I told her about my day, going out of my way to provide pleasing details, leaving out, of course, any mention at all of Gwen and my overpowering feelings for her. (33)

Annie John experiences none of the confusion that sometimes arises among characters that discover they are attracted to another person of the same gender.

Another book that might be said to include

gay characters that “just are” is *Weetzie Bat* (Block 1989, 1991), a text with a heterosexual narrator—Weetzie—and two secondary gay characters, Dirk and Duck. Overall, *Weetzie Bat* is a story that includes a gay character but in which gay “issues” do not dominate the text; that story—Dirk and Duck’s romance—is told later in *Witch Baby* (Block 1991, 1992) and *Baby Be-Bop* (Block 1995, 1997). Michael Cart sums up *Weetzie Bat* as “epitomiz[ing] what all of the most successful and satisfying books about homosexuality have in common,” that is, they deal with homosexuality “not in terms of sex or even success but in terms of love—and acceptance and respect” (237).

While gay characters and gay issues are sometimes incidental to the plot, they are not always as incidental as would appear at first glance.

While gay characters and gay issues are sometimes incidental to the plot, they are not always as incidental as would appear at first glance. Cuseo noted that the gay character “often serves as the backdrop, the setting, allowing other characters to react to ‘the problem’ ” (392-393). Sometimes gay characters are on the periphery of the major (straight) characters’ lives and serve as a catalyst that enables straight characters to react, grow, or evolve. Certainly this is true in texts in which straight girls fall for gay guys, but it is also true in other, less obvious ways. For example, in *Ironman* (Crutcher 1995, 1996), accepting the coach’s homosexuality contributes to the emotional growth of Bo, the heterosexual protagonist. In *Twelve Days in August* (Morrow 1993), the heterosexual character grows at the expense of his supposedly gay fellow soccer player. As the front cover reads, “Todd has a tough decision to make [. . .] if he can find the courage to do it.” The decision, unsurprisingly, is whether to join in the hate campaign against the gay character. The appearance of the “incidental” or minor gay

character contributes to the growth of a heterosexual protagonist with enough regularity to suggest a new stereotype.

With respect to homophobia, Day does not recommend texts that carry either “blatant or subtle homophobic and heterosexist messages” (xxiv). Of course she does not eliminate all the texts that include homophobic elements because almost all YA texts with gay/lesbian characters include the element of homophobia. The issue is how homophobia is handled. If the main message of a book is homophobic, that is, if a book perpetuates homophobic notions, then it is unacceptable. If, however, it examines “the underlying prejudice that some teenagers harbor toward lesbians and gays” (47) as Day states in her review of *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (Scoppettone 1978, 1991, 2000), Day will recommend it. As Day states in her review, in a homophobic society, lesbians and gay men are “vulnerable to hate crimes” (46). Homophobia is a reality that homosexuals face; how authors handle it is the issue.

Ethnic diversity is not as prevalent as it might be. Michael Cart, author of *My Father's Scar* (1996) noted that he was “struck” with the observation that “almost all the faces represented in [gay/lesbian YA literature] are white” (“Honoring Their Stories” 44). Cart notes as exceptions *The Dear One* (Woodson 1991), *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson 1997), and *Babylon Boyz* (Mowrey 1997). I would add others: *Coffee Will Make You Black* (Sinclair 1994), *Annie John* (Kincaid 1985), *Those Other People* (Childress 1989), *Who Framed Lorenzo Garcia?* (Hamilton 1995), and *The House You Pass on the Way* (Woodson 1997).

A sample reading of Day's recommended texts reveals a change in the right direction—that is, a number of long-term couples, including Duck and Dirk in the *Weetzie Bat* series (Block), Larry and Hugh in *Earthshine: a Novel* (Nelson 1994, 1996), and Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer in *Annie on My Mind* (Garden 1982, 1992). Unfortunately, Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer are closeted and hence of no use to the lesbian couple, Annie and Liza,

until they are outed at the story's end. Gay and lesbian young adults need and deserve—in real life as well as in literature—more role models to emulate.

If teachers unfamiliar with the genre of gay/lesbian YA literature stick with Day's recommendations, they will be pleasantly surprised. Nonetheless, for all of Day's strengths, there is a troubling pattern in the annotations of her texts in which she places heavy emphasis on pain, anguish, and the fight for acceptance. For example, Day says about *Witch Baby* (Block 1991, 1992) that it is a “poignant portrayal of how it feels to be an outsider” (18). About *My Father's Scar* (Cart 1996), Day observes, “Michael Cart tells the powerful story of how one gay person survived his anguished childhood to find love and acceptance” (21); and again, about *My Father's Scar*, she contends, “[t]his important theme of healing from unforgivable humiliation and pain is handled beautifully” (22).

I hope to see less need for healing and fewer gay/lesbian characters from troubled backgrounds overcoming unfortunate odds in the gay/lesbian YA texts of the future. I want, as Marion Dane Bauer expresses so well in an interview with *Bookbird*, “stories which involve people who happen to be homosexual simply living out their lives” (28). We are not there yet, but we'll get there, and it will be worth the trip.

¹ Stevie appears to be seriously depressed and undergoes considerable emotional angst before coming to terms with her sexuality and her life in general.

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Denise Jacobs, a Central Michigan University graduate, teaches English at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge. A recent recipient of a LSU service-learning grant, Denise is developing a composition class with a cultural-literacy emphasis, and, as a new addition to the LSU Women's and Gender Studies faculty, she hopes to expand her interest in gay/lesbian YA literature into a special topics course. Denise can be reached at denisekjacobs@hotmail.com.