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REVIEW

“Get to Know Me”: LGBT Literature for the Classroom

SIERRA HOLMES

One Man Guy by Michael Barakiva. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

Far From You by Tess Sharpe. Disney-Hyperion, 2014.

Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out by Susan Kuklin. Candlewick, 2015.

I'll Give You the Sun by Jandy Nelson. Penguin, 2014.

In 2009, *English Journal* published an issue with the theme “sexual identity and gender variance,” in which editor Ken Lindblom wrote that “those who value humanity in all its diverse forms are open to a wider world of friendships and experiences, and are largely unburdened by the kinds of prejudices that weigh some people down” (11). Each year, the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention includes an LGBT strand, in which sessions are devoted to meaningfully including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and themes in classrooms. Educators know and have known that LGBT is more than an acronym for many of the kids and adults in our buildings. And all the educators I know want their students to grow into the kind of people Lindblom describes, people who can see both their own value and the value of those who are different from them in some way.

As English teachers, we know the power of books to help our students understand others’ perspectives and make unfamiliar experiences seem more familiar. We also know the power of reading about experiences that are somehow like our own. The books described in this article are about many things: families adjusting to new realities, teenagers healing from devastating losses, children afraid of disappointing parents and parents afraid of disappointing children. Inside these books, readers will meet people who love who they are and also wish to be something else, who hold on when

they should and sometimes when they shouldn’t, who are, in short, just like the rest of us—and some of whom are LGBT. Although no book or set of books can represent the entire range of LGBT experience, these do offer non-LGBT students the opportunity to better understand the experiences of their LGBT classmates and community members. They also offer LGBT students the chance to find themselves in the books they read. All four books are worthy of a place in the classroom.

One Man Guy by Michael Barakiva (2014) revolves around surprises. At the beginning of the novel, fourteen-year-old Alek knows his Armenian-American parents are about to



surprise him with something. Unfortunately, their surprise is that Alek has to attend summer school in order to stay on the honors track, which also means he will miss the family vacation. But summer school is full of another set of surprises, the main one a boy named Ethan who immediately catches Alek’s eye. What Alek doesn’t

know but will soon find out is that Ethan is openly gay and has been out for some time. Ethan’s openness opens up possibilities for Alek, and after some hesitation, he decides to make the most of them.

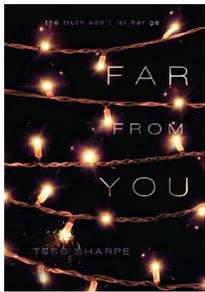
While Alek’s parents and brother Nik spend their summer cooking traditional Armenian food, participating in Armenian Orthodox church activities, and following Armenian traditions Alek often finds stifling or embarrassing, Alek spends his summer ditching summer school to accompany Ethan on various trips into New York City. Ethan teaches Alek how to spend a day in the city for under ten dollars, how to fit in with the rough-and-tumble skateboarding crowd, and how to go after what he wants even when he is told not to. With encouragement from Ethan and unwavering support from his best friend, Becky, Alek learns to be brave enough to do what makes him happy. But still the product of a

family steeped in Armenian beliefs and traditions, Alek fears that this new him will disappoint many of the people he loves. He does his best to hide the truth about his recent actions and relationship with Ethan, but when his family returns home early from vacation, Alek runs out of time to cover his tracks. Alek's parents are shocked and angry about his behavior, but not for the reasons he expected. Alek soon learns that there is more to his family than he knew, and that even the people he knows best can still surprise him. *One Man Guy* is a novel that reminds readers to expect the unexpected from the people they love and from themselves. It's a perfect book for readers who like happy endings.

Far From You by Tess Sharpe (2014) is something a bit unexpected in the world of LGBT young adult literature. It's a murder mystery, and also a story of first love found and lost tragically much too soon. It is a story of what a person—even a physically and emotionally wounded teenager—can do when motivated by two things that really matter: love and the truth.

Sophie is a bisexual seventeen-year-old who survived a car accident three years earlier with a painful, permanently damaged leg and an addiction to OxyContin as mementos of the experience. With the help of her aunt, and motivated by her love for her best friend Mina, Sophie got clean and stayed clean, but now everybody believes she has relapsed. On the way to a friend's house one night, Mina leads Sophie on a detour into the woods where they are attacked by a man in a mask. Sophie regains consciousness just in time to try to comfort Mina as she takes her last breaths. By the time the police arrive, Mina is dead and pills are in Sophie's jacket pocket. Everyone believes Mina died as a result of Sophie's drug deal gone wrong. Sophie's parents send her away to rehab and refuse to believe her when she tells them she has been set up. Sophie knows Mina's killer is still out there somewhere, but from the confines of rehab, there's nothing she can do.

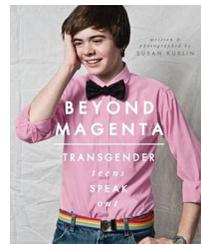
Luckily, after her release from rehab, Sophie finds an ally in Rachel, a very loyal stranger-turned-friend who found her when she stumbled out into the road on the night of the murder. With help from Rachel and others who cared about Mina, Sophie vows to uncover the truth behind what happened in the woods that night, and is forced to face many other truths in the process. As the secret Sophie and Mina



kept for so long is revealed to those who loved them both, the facts surrounding Mina's death are revealed as well. But confronting the truth can be both painful and dangerous. Of course, even now there is nothing Sophie won't do for Mina. The only question is how far she can go before there is no going back.

Far From You manages to turn a murder mystery into a love story, a combination of genres that will appeal to many teenagers. Keeping track of the various flashbacks will keep students thinking, and the heart-pounding resolution will keep them on the edge of their seats.

Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out by Susan Kuklin (2014) is a work of young adult nonfiction and a Stone-wall Honor Book that sheds light on a topic with which many teenagers are unfamiliar. In the book, six teenagers who identify as transgender or intersex tell their stories in interviews with the author. They speak of being born into the wrong body, coming out to their friends and families, and beginning the long, often painful, but ultimately rewarding process of becoming to everyone else the people they know themselves to be. Their stories are unflinchingly honest, touching on experiences like harassment and discrimination that many transgender people know all too well.



While care was clearly taken to make sure the teens' voices make up the bulk of the book, Kuklin's perspective as researcher adds clarity where it might be lacking and information where it is needed for understanding. Kuklin discusses topics teen readers might find unfamiliar or confusing, such as appropriate pronoun usage and the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity, in a way that makes them easy to understand. Photographs accompany most of the narratives, showing the featured teenagers as young children and throughout their transitions. Those photographs provide readers who are not transgender with visual evidence that people who might seem to be very different from them are, in many ways, very much like them.

Even students who are very familiar and comfortable with the idea of different sexual orientations might have little or no experience with transgender people, which is why this book is so important. The people in it are real, and although they in no way represent the entire spectrum of transgender experience, they do provide readers with a starting point for understanding that experience. The interview format is relatively uncommon in young adult literature, making this

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book a good option for teachers who want to encourage reading in new genres. The fact that the book tells the stories of real teenagers makes it especially appealing to young adult readers.

I'll Give You the Sun by Jandy Nelson (2014) tells the story of fraternal twins, a brother and sister named Noah and Jude, who are struggling to make sense of their lives after the accident that claimed their mother's. Once inseparable, incomplete without the other, the twins now find themselves separated by walls of secrets they just can't bring themselves to share. At the beginning of the novel, it seems they are on parallel tracks, always close but never quite meeting. As their stories progress, it becomes clear that they are actually on a collision course, and the only place all their secrets can bring them is right back to each other. The only question is what will happen when their worlds collide.

Noah is an artist and misfit in his high school, doing his best not to show how deeply it hurt him when Jude was admitted to art school and his own admission was denied. But what really eats Noah up inside are the other two secrets he is keeping from his family, one about the unexpected new boy



in his life, Brian, and the other about what happened on the day his mother died. If he tells the former, he fears losing the father with whom he has finally developed a close relationship after years of feeling like the second-favorite child; if he tells the latter, he fears that the only two family members he has left will lose their comforting illusions about the wife and mother they lost. As

Noah's story unfolds, it becomes painfully clear that hiding who he is and what he knows will destroy him from the inside out. The reader realizes that before Noah does, however, and watching him agonize over how to love Brian and his family, how to be who he is and who he thinks they need him to be, is gut wrenching and heartbreaking all at once. For Noah, honesty has to be all or nothing. The only question is, when he is ready to tell the truth, will the people he loves be ready to hear it?

While Noah struggles to come to terms with his sexuality and the painful knowledge that his mother was not who everyone thinks she was, Jude struggles against demons of her own. After a run of bad luck at art school and feeling like her father's affections have been transferred to her brother, Jude relies on visits from the spirit of her dead grandmother and wisdom from that same grandmother's own personal

bible to make it through her days. After more than a little effort, she is able to convince Guillermo Garcia, a famous sculptor who had once been interviewed by her art critic mother, to become her mentor. Guillermo is a tortured soul who Jude realizes is still aching from the loss of a love about whom he does not and will not speak. Guillermo's out-of-control emotions might be enough to scare Jude out of his studio once and for all if it weren't for Oscar, the handsome and mysterious teenage former-addict who Guillermo cares for like a son. Jude quickly falls for Oscar, but Oscar's loyalty to her is questionable at best, leaving her with more than enough on-again, off-again heartbreak of her own. Jude doesn't introduce Noah to her mentor, but as it turns out, Noah already knows more about Guillermo than he'd like. What he knows could change everything for all of them.

I'll Give You the Sun is about siblings losing and finding each other, children losing and finding their parents, and a family losing and finding the truth. It is about Noah coming out and Jude coming clean and both of them coming to terms with the pasts they can't control and the futures they can. It will put knots in your students' stomach and tears in their eyes, leaving them wishing for just one more chapter with the characters they've come to know and love. Many young adult novels are good. Few are this good. Alternating between Noah and Jude's perspectives and between two different times in their lives adds complexity that teachers will appreciate. This Printz Award and Stonewall Honor winner will surely win rave reviews from your students.

In last fall's mental illness-themed issue of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, I wrote about the importance of helping kids who have mental illness or whose family members or friends have mental illness find themselves inside the books in our classrooms. I also wrote about the importance of helping those who are not affected by mental illness to understand those who are. The same is true about this issue's theme. Some of our kids identify as LGBT now, and some will later. Some of our kids do not identify as LGBT, but they know and love someone who does. They deserve to find themselves and the people they love in the books we offer, to understand that they are not alone in their experience of being or caring about someone who is LGBT. Of course, some of our kids are not LGBT and are not close to anybody who is. Those kids too can benefit from books that help them understand the experiences of their LGBT classmates and community members. At the end of his interview, Jessy, one of the teenagers featured in *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*, leaves readers with a simple request: “Get to know

me” (29). These books will help readers get to know and love a wide variety of real and fictional LGBT people. They would make excellent additions to a classroom library.

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Sierra Holmes is a regular contributor to the LAJM. She teaches middle and high school English and is a teacher consultant with the Lake Michigan Writing Project.

Correction: The Fall 2014 LAJM mistitled Sierra Holmes' review on the header of page 70 of the issue. The correct title of the article is "Mental Health Matters: Addressing Mental Illness in Young Adult Fiction."