



Beyond Picket Fences:

WHAT GAY / QUEER/ LGBTQ TEENS WANT FROM THE LIBRARY

Author's Note on Terminology: *All language has coded meanings beyond the literal, and that can be especially true of labels that we give to ourselves and others. Many people about my age (33) and younger use the word "queer" to describe themselves as "other than the white-picket-fence variety." We mean this word as an affirming and positive label, not in a derogatory sense. Queer is still considered a slur by some people, though. Here I use it interchangeably with gay and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) to describe a range of sexualities on the spectrum of human sexuality outside what is considered heterosexual or straight.*

As young adult librarians, we hope that outcast, questioning, confused teens will find their way to the library, will find it a safe place, and will find the librarian impartial and helpful. We don't reach out to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ) teens as much as we could, at times because they are an almost invisible group, and at times because we don't want to single them out from the crowd or make assumptions about them that they might not yet be making about themselves. In our own communities, we might not know any gay teens, we might find that the books are checked out but never know who takes them, or we might find gay books hidden among the poetry books where someone has been surreptitiously reading them. We know statistically that queer youth must be there, but we might not know how best to serve them.

Literary Preconceptions

Some examples of queer teens using the library might be familiar to librarians. In many works of fiction, when a teen is having problems that relate to questions of sexuality (she thinks she's queer, she thinks someone in her family is queer, he is being harassed because someone thinks he's queer), she or he often heads to the library. Sometimes he gets help from the librarian. Sometimes she finds information that is clinical and cold as Liza does in Nancy Garden's novel, **Annie on My Mind**. Liza first looks in the encyclopedia to

find out something about being gay, but "that didn't tell me much about any of the things I felt. What struck me most, though, was that, in that whole long article, the word 'love' wasn't used even once. That made me mad; it was as if whoever wrote the article didn't know that gay people actually love each other" (143). When Liza talks to Annie the next day, Annie steers her toward the fiction.

*"Encyclopedias are no good," she said, going to her closet and pulling out a battered, obviously secondhand book. **Patience and Sarah**, it said on the cover, by Isabel Miller. . . . "Please. It's a lovely book. Just read it, ok?"*

I did read the book, and Annie reread it, and it helped us discuss the one part of ourselves we'd only talked around so far. We read other books, too, in the next week, trying to pretend we weren't there when we checked them out of the library, and we bought—terrified—a couple of gay magazines and newspapers. I felt as if I were meeting parts of myself in the gay people I read about. Gradually, I began to feel calmer inside, more complete and sure of myself, and I knew from the way Annie looked as we talked, and from what she said, that she did also (144).

Stephanie, in **S. P. Likes A. D.** by Catherine Brett, is also looking in library books for explanations about who she is. She goes to the library under the premise that she is researching her dinosaur project:

Her real reason for coming to the library had been to read about homosexuality. For two hours she had dragged every relevant book she could find from the shelves. She'd taken them back to her table and carefully hidden them inside the dinosaur books. Just in case someone was looking. A lot of the titles were in LARGE CAPITAL LETTERS and she was sure they could be seen across the entire library.

She had methodically combed each one for references to her particular situation. There were, however, no references to her particular situation; maybe, she reasoned, . . . because no one else was in her exact situation. Everybody's life was different.

She did find out certain facts from reading through the books. She found out that one in ten people was gay. She found

out that no one really knew why people were gay, whether it was a learned behaviour or was genetic.

. . . . Reading about homosexuality made Stephanie feel less isolated in her feelings. But not all that she read made her feel good. The health texts were fine because a fact was a nice neutral thing. It didn't say "bad" or "good" or "right" or "wrong." It said "this is this". . . . But there were also books with testimonials from gay people and from the families of these people. These were more unsettling. Fact wasn't important there. Emotion was. And often the emotions weren't very appealing. Stephanie read about one woman who told her family she was a lesbian and because of that they would have nothing more to do with her. They disowned her (75-77).

Sometimes a teen finds a safe place to hang out, free from bullying as in **Out of the Shadows** by Sue Hines, where Ro says, "When school began again I threw myself into Year 8 work, spending lunchtimes in the school library to avoid the other kids, and afternoons in the local library to avoid Deb. It was a manageable routine, solitary but stress free, and even though my emotional life was hell, my grades were great. How nice" (116). She is avoiding the kids who taunt her because her mother is a lesbian and avoiding her mother's lover, who lives with them.

Sometimes a queer teen is learning about all the people in history who have been gay, as in *Am I Blue?*, the short story by Bruce Coville in the collection by the same name. Vincent finds himself in the library with his fairy godfather, Melvin, who has given him the gift of gaydar. Using his gaydar, Vincent can see everyone with any gay leanings in shades of blue. Surprisingly, the librarian isn't blue at all, although the homophobic politician is. Vincent discovers:

My bluevision worked on pictures, too!

"Julius Caesar?" I asked in astonishment.

"Every woman's husband, every man's wife," said Melvin. "I met him at a party on the other side once. Nice guy." Flipping some more pages, he said, "Here, check this one out."

"Alexander the Great was a fairy!" I cried.

"Shbbbbb!" binned Melvin. "We're in a library!" (13)

These literary teens aren't able to get all their needs met by going to the library. As librarians, we understand that. Yet books, literary characters, and access to appropriate and accurate and authoritative information can be a step toward understanding and acceptance, and they can help someone to know that he or she is not alone. It's important that teens know what libraries can provide and that they can be safe and welcoming places.

Real Live Teens

Literary teens are based on adults' ideas of teens. Young adult literature is remarkably realistic and relevant to teens' lives, but it is mostly written by adults looking back at their teen years or observing the teens around them. Does it reflect the experiences of real LGBTQ teen readers? Do real teens use the library in ways that literary teens do? What is their experience in the library if they do use it?

The only people who know are teens themselves, so I decided to ask them. My research began with these questions:

1. Is the public library perceived as a source of information that can help in teens' sexuality/identity search?
2. What information are queer teens looking for when they get to the library?
3. Are libraries safe places to ask for help with sexuality questions?
4. Are libraries safe places to hang out?

5. What are teens looking for in books versus what they can find online?

6. How could libraries better help teens in their searches? With what materials and services?

Targeting self-identified LGBTQ teens who seek services at LGBTQ teen youth centers, I gathered their responses via an online survey, an almost identical paper survey, and two focus groups. I promoted the online survey through word of mouth and several Gay/Straight Alliances in the New York City area. I also gathered responses to the survey at the youth-organized conference, Breaking Walls/Building Bridges, held at the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center in Manhattan.

Survey Findings

The teens who responded to the survey claimed the labels gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, questioning, straight, transgender, and transsexual, in that order. Lesbian and gay each got about 30 percent of the responses, bisexual got about 25 percent, and queer about 14.5 percent. Respondents were allowed to pick as many categories as they thought fit them, and several did mark more than one. Some write-in responses were genderqueer, punk cool, gender-exploring, open-minded, intersexed, myself, and veronica-sexual.

A little more than half of the survey respondents said they have gone to the library to find answers to questions about being gay, or questions about someone they know being gay. Overwhelmingly, teens sought stories of real people when they went to the library to look for information, a response that got twice as many votes as any other. The other responses, in order of importance, included:

- coming-out stories
- activism how-to information, including starting a group and equal rights for queer youth
- stories of fictional characters
- lists of community resources
- books about what it means to be queer, sexuality, queerness, and gayness
- safe sex/sexual health

Teen respondents were also looking for materials dealing with trans issues, both fiction and nonfiction; bisexual issues and questions; and sex books that talk about what gay sex is, with personal stories.

The respondents feel fairly confident using the library; 82 percent are public library users. Sixty-seven percent say they can look up answers by themselves, and 45 percent feel comfortable enough to ask the librarian questions. That's the positive side. However, one third of the teens responding to the online survey claimed that they could not find what they want in the library, and almost a quarter of all the respondents feel that people judge them in the library. Twenty-five percent also do not like to ask the librarians questions. Only twenty percent feel safe from harassment in the library.

These teens are overwhelmingly readers of gay teen or adult fiction. Eighty percent say they read books with gay characters. They are able to name their favorites. They follow the authors who tell a good story, and they look for more books by those authors. They like to see their stories on the printed page.

One boy said of K. M. Soehnlein's **The World of Normal Boys**, "Have you read this? This is my life." Other favorites include **Annie on My Mind** by Nancy Garden, **Hard Love** by Ellen Wittlinger, **Rainbow Boys** by Alex Sanchez, **Rubyfruit Jungle** by Rita Mae Brown, **Stone Butch Blues** by Leslie Feinberg, **Kissing the Witch** by Emma Donoghue, and books by Francesca Lia Block.



Conclusions

I was impressed with the young people that I met at the conference and in my focus groups, many of whom were self-possessed and confident about their identity or about their search for the identity that felt right to them. They were often aware of the resources, impressed when they found books or Web sites that covered new territory, and clear about where there was a lack of information. Many of them, like many of us in our daily lives, were willing to search on the Internet to look for reliable, up-to-date information in arenas such as politics or trans health, where information might be changing every day and is sometimes felt to be "fringe." They were wonderful witnesses about their situations. They might identify as questioning, but don't mistake that for confused. These teens are actively searching, feeling out their boundaries, and testing their sexual waters, as they should be, developmentally. (See **Facing Facts: Sexual Health for America's Adolescents** by the National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health at http://www.siecus.org/pubs/Facing_Facts.pdf)

WHAT LIBRARIANS CAN DO

Now that we know what LGBTQ teens think, how can we provide what they need in the library?

Offering Vital Materials and Information

Real stories about real teens

Materials that will satisfy the requirements of gay teen readers include biographies of gay people, collections of coming-out stories, and photo essay books, such as **The Shared Heart** by Adam Mastoon, that profile young people with pictures and their stories. **In Your Face** by Mary Gray is also a wonderful collection of real stories about real teens from all over the country talking about their home situations, how it is to grow up gay where they are, how they came to understand that they were gay, and what they are doing to reveal or hide their sexuality. **Love Makes a Family** by Gigi Kaeser is a portrait of adults living together and feeling proud about being gay and raising kids. Kevin Jennings's books talk about coming out during school years and coming out of it alive, and Eric Marcus answers the basic questions that everyone has about queer people. These books also examine, via the stories of these individuals, what it means to be gay and how it changes or doesn't change a person's life. They reassure their readers that queer people are normal people.

Historical gay figures

Young people also benefit by knowing which famous people from history were gay. Many biographies written for teens skip over the fact that a famous historical person was gay or was married with lovers of the same sex. This practice is a disservice to young people, who need to know that queer people have always existed and that they also have always acted upon their desires. **The Knitting Circle** (<http://myweb.lsbu.ac.uk/~stafflag/people.html>) contains an alphabetical list of historical figures who, at least by some historical account, lived a queer life. This and other useful Web sites can be found by accessing the **Library Q** (<http://library.cudenver.edu/libq>),



a Web site with a reference shelf that contains wonderful resources for librarians. Although this resource has not been updated in a few years and some of the links are dead, the ones that remain contain a wealth of queer information. Teens need to hear what kinds of lives gay people had in other times, and how the expectations that we have about sexuality have changed. As librarians, we need to know which biographies tell about the real life of the person, letting the young queer person know that his existence has a history, too.

Community information

Libraries can help teens connect with local information, groups, and activism information, too. Again, one way is through the books in your collections. In a new 2003 book, **GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens**, author Kelly Huegel covers all the topics necessary to get anyone started on understanding identity. It has the most significant section on transgender teens in any book available, with a thorough resources section listing national organizations where teens can connect with others. This and other similar books, such as **Free Your Mind: The Book for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth and Their Allies**, are full of information as well as reliable connections for teens striking out on the Internet. Libraries can also post flyers for local queer youth group meetings and LGBTQ centers (if your community has one), and make gay newspapers and magazines available.



Sexuality information

Elsewhere in the nonfiction collection are the teen sex and dating books. Find out which ones discuss gay teens equally with straight teens. One that I like is **Changing Bodies, Changing Lives** by Ruth Bell. Know which ones talk frankly about gay sex, a very common question. Before they want to do it, many teens want to know what "it" is. They want to fantasize about it and see if they can imagine themselves doing it. There are not many good movie, television, fiction, or magazine representations, and they need some details. Ideally, libraries will be able to offer teens some images of gay sex that do not come from pornography distributors.

Making Information Accessible

Where are gay and lesbian materials?

The teens that I surveyed loved the library. The focus groups and survey participants were self-selected and therefore very positive about using the library. Even within this library-happy group, however, I got some disturbing answers. Some teens felt that the gay books were hidden in the library, as compared to a bookstore, for example, because there are no signs labelling a section as "Gay and Lesbian." They don't see displays, even though some branches have displays, especially for Pride Month. They note that the gay books say they are checked in but are often missing from the shelves, and don't get replaced when they disappear. The survey asked what teens were unable to find in the library. Answers included lesbian novels, current gay fiction, list of community groups for my community, disabled rights and empowerment, trans issues of all types, how to tell if someone is gay, famous gay people and gay people in history, and local gay news and events. These answers might mean that the library doesn't have these items or perhaps just that teens were unable to locate them. It certainly means that libraries need to do a better job of making queer resources visible.

Is it safe to ask?

We can make the library a safe, authoritative, confidential, and accessible place for teens to do the information-gathering part of their search for sexuality and identity. In my research, many teens expressed some level of discomfort, fear, or reluctance to ask

questions in the library. I hope that we can improve these statistics. When I asked my focus groups what would make them feel more comfortable, they suggested that “if you got different people to work, of different sexualities, . . . and they should wear a sign on their nametags . . . like a rainbow or a triangle, something that gives them away. Maybe they wear corduroy pants. Then you could find out the gay people who work there.” Librarians have the power in the library to make the information available or to hide it, to make teens feel welcome or to make them feel unwanted. Even if librarians feel nervous talking or thinking about queerness, we must remember that searching young people are much more nervous than we are. We are the ones who can make them comfortable in our space.

What about labeling materials?

In each of my focus groups, I asked teens about labeling books—especially fiction books—that contain queer content. The answers were not simple. Some teens relished having all the gay books in one section, both fiction and nonfiction, so they are easy to find, as in the bookstore. Some liked the idea of putting stickers (rainbows or triangles) on the spines of books that contain gay characters, so they are as easy to spot as science fiction. Others felt that each of these solutions would stick the label on their foreheads, pointing out to other teens that they are gay. A compromise that many teens liked was sticking one copy of the book and having other copies available without the sticker. Then they could easily browse the shelves to find the gay books, but wouldn't have to take out the copy with the glaring, “outing” sticker.

Will being seen with gay books be embarrassing?

Also very important is the way that teens are treated when they want to take those books out of the library. If, as happened to one young man in my focus group, they go to the library to check out a book and the clerk retrieves the book from the shelf, laughs at the title with a colleague, and then doesn't look at the young person when checking it out, they will not feel welcome or safe at the library. One girl mentioned that she felt judged just by being a youth in the library. Many were comfortable when looking for books by themselves, but a few felt scared to approach the librarian with a question about sexuality. One person responded, “[My community] is close-minded so I get afraid to ask questions.”

What materials are available?

Finally, it is important to make sure that everyone working on the information or reference desk knows how to find these resources. We who read gay teen fiction must make booklists of titles and authors. Find out which ones the library owns. Post the list where people can find it. Make a bookmark. Update it regularly, especially if the catalog doesn't include subject headings for fiction. Remember the short story collections. We have important work to do for all our readers, perhaps, and especially for the queer youth population, by highlighting the new books available in the genre, giving them lists of classics, and making sure that we can answer their questions and point them to reliable online sources, too.

About one quarter of the survey respondents said that they don't read gay fiction. For the rest, gay teen fiction is a staple in their reading diet. Most could list the books that they had read and loved. Teens want to see a new, broad selection of gay fiction in their local public library, not just the central library. Most libraries can fill patron requests from other branches, but teens want *their own branch* to have at least some of those books.

What do gay teens want to know when they walk into a library?

They want to know that we know that gay people live in every neighborhood, not just in that gay neighborhood over there. And they want to know that we welcome queer people to the library.

Books Mentioned

FICTION

- Brett, Catherine. **S. P. Likes A. D.** Women's Press, 1989. 118p. \$7.95 Trade pb. 0-88961-142-4.
- Brown, Rita Mae. **Rubyfruit Jungle.** Daughters, Inc., 1973. O.P. Bantam, 1983. 256p. \$7.50 pb. 0-553-27886-X.
- Coville, Bruce. **Am I Blue? in Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence.** Marion Dane Bauer, Ed. HarperCollins, 1994. O.P. 1995. 224p. \$6.99 Trade pb. 0-06-440587-7. **VOYA** August 1994.
- Donoghue, Emma. **Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins.** HarperCollins, 1997. 228p. \$15.95. 0-06-027575-8. \$11.99 Trade pb. 0-06-440772-1. **VOYA** August 1997.
- Feinberg, Leslie. **Stone Butch Blues.** Firebrand Books, 1993. 304p. PLB \$26.95. 1-56341-030-3. \$13.95 Trade pb. 1-56341-029-X.
- Garden, Nancy. **Annie on My Mind.** Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1982. O.P. 1992. 232p. \$5.95 Trade pb. 0-374-40414-3. **VOYA** August 1982.
- Hines, Sue. **Out of the Shadows.** Random House/Australia, 1998. Morrow/Avon, 2000. 160p. \$6.99 Trade pb. 0-380-81192-8.
- Sanchez, Alex. **Rainbow Boys.** Simon & Schuster, 2001. 256p. \$17. 0-689-84100-0. \$7.99 Trade pb. 0-689-85770-5. **VOYA** December 2001.
- Soehnlein, K. M. **The World of Normal Boys.** Kensington Publishing, 2001. 288p. \$14 Trade pb. 1-57566-661-8.
- Wittlinger, Ellen. **Hard Love.** Simon & Schuster, 1999. 224p. \$16.95. 0-689-82134-4. \$8 Trade pb. 0-689-84154-X. **VOYA** August 1999.

NONFICTION

- Bass, Ellen, and Kate Kaufman. **Free Your Mind: The Book for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth and Their Allies.** HarperPerennial, 1996. 448p. \$15.95 Trade pb. 0-06-095104-4.
- Bell, Ruth. **Changing Bodies, Changing Lives.** Random House, 1980. O.P. Vintage, 1988, Rev. ed. 272p. \$12.95 Trade pb. 0-685-18233-9. Crown, 1998, Expanded 3rd ed. 432p. \$24 Trade pb. 0-8129-2990-X.
- Gray, Mary. **In Your Face: Stories from the Lives of Queer Youth.** Harrington Park Press/Haworth, 1999. 164p. \$39.95. 0-7890-0076-8. Haworth, 2003. \$19.95 Trade pb. 1-56023-887-9.
- Huegel, Kelly. **GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens.** Free Spirit, 2003. 240p. \$15.95 Trade pb. 1-57542-126-7. **VOYA** December 2003.
- Kaaser, Gigi, et al. **Love Makes a Family: Portraits of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Parents and Their Families.** University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. 280p. \$40. 1-55849-160-0. \$24.95 Trade pb. 1-55849-161-9.
- Mastoon, Adam. **The Shared Heart: Portraits and Stories Celebrating Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young People.** Morrow/Avon, 1997. 88p. \$24.50. 0-688-14931-6. HarperCollins, 2001. PLB \$15.89. 0-06-029556-2. \$6.95 Trade pb. 0-06-447304-X. **VOYA** June 1998.

Darla Linville is Acting Assistant Coordinator of Young Adult Services at The New York Public Library and a lesbian. She noticed that teens would sidle up to the desk and ask to find books for a “research project about bisexuality,” especially after she shaved her head. These occurrences led her to think about the library as a source of reliable information in a safe environment for LGBTQ youth. E-mail her with questions or complaints at dlinville@nypl.org.