

HOMOSEXUAL THEMES, ISSUES, AND CHARACTERS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: AN OVERVIEW

by Dawn Savage



INTRODUCTION

Statistics on the proportions of homosexual individuals in the U.S. have important consequences for young adult literature and young adult collection development. For example, "According to the Kinsey Institute, ten percent of our population is homosexual, so in an average American high school of one-thousand, one-hundred teens may be gay."¹ Young adult literature that addresses the issue of homosexuality is very relevant when it is considered that in 1994 two million young adults aged 13-19 claimed to be homosexual.² This is certainly a sizeable number, particularly given that many "fear rejection by their parents and other relatives should they choose to reveal their sexual orientation."³

When authors use homosexuals as main characters, they have the opportunity to give readers more insight into the physical, emotional, and social relationships that occur between two people of the same sex. When authors use homosexuals as secondary characters, the effect often is to distance the reader from any involvement in the issues surrounding homosexuality by viewing them through the eyes of a heterosexual. Many young adult books featuring homosexual characters are often stereotypical. Many also portray negative consequences as the result of the homosexual lifestyle.

Librarians should be aware of these two prevalent approaches in order to better tailor the collection to the needs of different audiences. Some readers may be struggling to identify their sexuality. Others may know someone who is homosexual and may simply be curious about that lifestyle: "Young adult books frequently show young teens that they are not the only ones who experience problems and even turmoil when dealing with their bodies and sexuality, with changing relationships with parents and friends, with more philosophically advanced ways of thinking about themselves, the world, and their place in it."⁴ Young adults experience dramatic physical and emotional changes and the literature they read can reaffirm the way they feel about their sexuality or about those who differ in sexuality from them. Young adults who have

friends who are struggling with their sexual identity will be hard pressed to find literature that could alleviate these uncertainties. They will be even less likely to find literature that portrays the homosexual lifestyle in a favorable light.

"Young adults have many questions and much misinformation about homosexuality and reading is one of the few private ways for adolescents to gather information about this subject."⁵ It is suggested that "Reading a book is safer for a gay teenager than talking to a person...because there is no risk of rejection from a book."⁶ The books that the libraries provide them can help "assuage the fears of gay and lesbian YAs, assuring them that they are not alone. But just as importantly, it will give heterosexual youth a picture of and perhaps some insight into the larger world around them."⁷

Unfortunately there is bias in many fiction novels written for young adults that feature homosexual characters. Many of the books that have been written for and about gay or lesbian teens portray retribution for teens being gay and "may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes."⁸ Because of the rarity of books about homosexual young adults, the views found in these books often express "the social attitudes prevailing at the time in which they were written and published."⁹ There are numerous examples that clearly show such retribution for being homosexual: *I'll Get There*; Isabell Holland's *The Man Without a Face*; *Trying Hard To Hear You* by Sandra Scoppettone; and Lynn Hall's *Sticks and Stones*—either the gay character or someone... close to the gay character dies, usually in a car crash."¹⁰

Stereotypes can also lead the reader into believing the worst about the homosexual population through homophobic main characters in many books. When writing about homosexual characters "beginning in the eighties, the gay/lesbian character often became secondary (like Jerry in Robert Lipsyte's 1981 novel, *Summer Rules*, for example) —the character becomes a friend of, neighbor of, teacher of or relative of the heterosexual main character."¹¹ This is evident throughout contemporary young adult novels such as *Angus*,

Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging by Louise Rennison; Virginia Euwer Wolff's *True Believer*; and Chris Crutcher's *Ironman*.

YA NOVELS WITH MINOR CHARACTERS WHO ARE HOMOSEXUAL

This approach allows the author to broach the topic while still distancing the story from the central issues relating to homosexuality. When using secondary characters, the author does not need to describe the personal relationship that occurs between two same sex people. Therefore the reader is able to view the lives of homosexuals through the eyes of the main character. Such stories typically remain uncensored, unlike books that have carried homosexuals as main characters.

In *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging* by Louise Rennison, the main character Georgia believes her gym teacher, Miss Stamp, to be a lesbian. Georgia is outraged that they had to play a new game in gym and expresses it in this diary-like book: "Miss Stamp is obviously a sex pervert as well as clearly being a lesbian. Why else would anyone make girls run around in sports knickers hitting a ball with sticks?"¹²

This is not the only occasion in which Rennison expresses homophobia through her main character Georgia. Later in the book, Miss Stamp, who is merely a secondary character in this novel, is talking with the class about personal hygiene and body odor. The girls get so disgusted they all run to take a shower. The main character describes the event thus: "Miss Stamp was amazed—she usually has to prod us and shout at us to change at all in winter. She came and looked at us in the shower in amazement. Then we remembered she was a lesbian. So we ran screaming out of the shower. It's a bloody nightmare of pervs, this school."¹³ Such portrayals encourage the reader to believe the stereotype that all lesbians are perverts. It also gives the impression that one would not be safe in a locker room around anyone who has a different sexual orientation. Rennison's character also falls into the stereotype that lesbians cannot be feminine women and talks of Miss Stamp growing facial hair.

For some young adults, this characterization will be unimportant because they have had other sources of information. However, there will be some young adults who will take this simplistic description of lesbiansim at face value. Due to the fact that Miss Stamp is a secondary character, the issue of homosexuality is peripheral to the story. The attention that is given is negative and can provide overly simplistic and stereotypical information about homosexuality for young adults.

True Believer by Virginia Euwer Wolff follows LaVaughn who has fallen in love with a homosexual boy. Jody is therefore unobtainable as a boyfriend

because of his sexual preferences. LaVaughn's reaction to this discovery is violent and hateful: "I went to my closet with scissors in my hand and I cut my blue crushed velvet dress up the middle, laid it open like a wound. I never did such a thing as that before in my life."¹⁴ LaVaughn is angry and jealous of the boy who is with Jody when in her mind it really should be her.

LaVaughn's character then chooses to ignore Jody because of this. She describes how "I already knew how to avoid his schedule going through side doors and back ways. But everything was inside out now. Two boys kissing. Would I dream such a thing? No."¹⁵ LaVaughn struggles with this new discovery regarding Jody's sexual orientation and refuses to share it with anyone. Yet while she shuns Jody, she later realizes she misses her friendship with him.

Although this is a story of a homosexual boy being pursued by a heterosexual girl, Wolff does recognize the need to develop some finality to the choice the boy has made and the acceptance that finally comes from LaVaughn, when her character observes that "I knew I could keep freezing myself away from Jody pretending I could change him or I could quit doing that."¹⁶ LaVaughn realizes that she can't change Jody for who he is or his homosexuality.

The author shows Jody's homosexuality through the eyes of LaVaughn. Because Jody is a secondary character, the reader does not learn the name of the boy he was kissing. Nor does the reader learn of homosexuality as a relationship other than it is obviously seen by LaVaughn, as a physical one. Certainly, a disadvantage to using secondary characters is that it may lead young adults to believe that homosexuality is based upon purely physical responses.

Chris Crutcher also uses a homosexual character as a secondary character in *Ironman*. This character takes the role of Bo's swim coach, Mr. Serbousek, whom Bo respects. He is angry and defensive when his father suggests that Mr. Serbousek is gay, saying, "Dad, Mr. Serbousek is not a homo."¹⁷ Bo's father insists that if he does not have a wife or a girlfriend than he must be a homosexual and that Bo should be careful because, "You never know what those guys have in mind."¹⁸ Within this very short conversation the reader is exposed to the point of view that homosexuals can not be trusted and that they make unwanted advances on people of the same sex. This conversation between father and son allows the author, using the father, to show bigotry and hatred to homosexuals that later reflects on Bo's actions toward his coach. While Bo learns to accept his coach's homosexuality, a reader must process these negative messages and Bo's confusion about his own attitudes before arriving at a more accepting perspective. The author is able to introduce

Mr. Serbousek's homosexuality through the perspective of the main character, Bo, and still keep some distance from any relationships that may occur between Mr. Serbousek and his lover.

Crutcher uses the secondary character of a swimming coach to bring out some very difficult issues concerning young adults and homosexuality such as insecurity, curiosity, bigotry, and isolation. When Bo finds out from Mr. Serbousek that the rumors are true and that he is a homosexual, Bo is shocked, "He sleeps with a man. I mean, he doesn't sleep with him, necessarily; he has sex with him."¹⁹ Although Crutcher is distancing the reader from the homosexual relationship between Mr. Serbousek and his lover, the reader gets a glimpse of what that relationship is like, "I have a male roommate, and he met Jack at a faculty Christmas party a couple of years ago."²⁰ This one sentence allows the reader to see that there is a relationship between the two men. The roommate has a name, Jack, and Mr. Serbousek is confident enough that he takes Jack to a Christmas party. These clips are all glimpses of a relationship between two people that the reader never meets.

Crutcher also masterfully shows the insecurity and uncertainty that young adults such as Bo face, when his main character explains "I mean, I don't think there's any danger, because I certainly have never felt anything like, you know, sexual, coming from Mr. S, But I can't help wondering if it means anything about me, that he likes me."²¹ Similar to Louise Rennison's character, Georgia in *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging*, Bo finds himself wondering if he could be attacked or converted to homosexuality.

What makes Chris Crutcher's *Ironman* stand out above the other young adult novels that use secondary characters to introduce homosexuality as an issue is that small glimpse of the relationship between Mr. Serbousek and Jack, his roommate. Crutcher uses a defining word that for their relationship; they are a "couple."²² Bo confronts his insecurity, curiosity, bigotry, and isolation to renew his friendship with his swimming coach. Young adults learn through *Ironman* that as individuals there will still be strong feelings and emotions to overcome, but to ostracize a person because of their sexual orientation is damaging to that individual.

ADDITIONAL YA NOVELS WITH CHARACTERS WHO ARE HOMOSEXUAL

Books that have used homosexuals as main characters have historically been in danger of being censored. *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden is an important novel for lesbian young adults because it "examines

what reality is for two young women coming to grips with their sexuality and trying to find models around which to structure their lives."²³ Young girls who struggle with their sexuality can read this novel and feel like they are not alone. The author uses the main characters of Liza and Annie to relate to the reader a lesbian relationship that begins innocently between two young adult females and blossoms into a loving relationship between two young women. When using a homosexual as a main character, the author has the ability to allow the reader to experience what the character is experiencing and to learn from the character.

Liza had not thought previously of being a lesbian prior to knowing Annie. Annie had a sexual attraction to Liza and after the two experimented, Annie wrote Liza a letter to confront the issue: "The thing is since you haven't thought about it—about being gay—I'm trying to tell myself very firmly that it wouldn't be fair of me—I don't know, influence, you try to push you into something you don't want, or don't want yet, or something." Annie really wants to love someone her own age. It is hard for her to think of letting Liza go. However, if Liza isn't prepared for a homosexual relationship then Annie doesn't want to force her into one. This kind of insight into the relationship that comes from two people that have been emotionally and physically involved cannot be fully explored in a novel where the characters are used as secondary characters.

Garden, "states that the body of gay literature can, 'help bring the gay community out of invisibility into the light...in turn [helping] our young people to grow up to be strong, healthy, members of society.'"²⁴ This kind of literature "could facilitate the acceptance and understanding of an important population invisible to the mainstream culture."²⁵ Consequently, *Annie on My Mind* made the ALA Best Book for Young Adults and was chosen A Booklist Reviewers Choice. Garden has also published another lesbian young adult novel called *Lark in the Morning*. Both novels are considered to be "milestones"²⁶ in the literature regarding homosexual young adults. Both have lesbian main characters; both "were published initially hardback and by a major press."²⁷

However, these works are not universally acclaimed. In 1993 "a copy of the book was burned by religious fundamentalists in front of the Kansas City (MO) school district headquarters."²⁸ Several months later, the school district pulled the book from its shelves. The school district was sued by seven students and in 1995 it was ruled that "books cannot be removed simply because school officials disagree with certain ideas they contain."²⁹

The Arizona Kid by Ron Koertge, published in 1988, is written from a slightly different perspective regarding the homosexual lifestyle. The main character is heterosexual, but he goes to stay with his uncle in Arizona and his uncle is homosexual. It is through this uncle-nephew relationship the reader learns about sexuality and gay issues. However, these "gay characteristics and gay issues are often depicted sympathetically,"³⁰ leading the reader to believe that they need to feel sorry for people that choose to live alternative lifestyles.

In the novel the main character, Billy, treats his uncle as if he is a child in many cases. When Billy's uncle explains that he is not coming home right away but going out to the bars, Billy questions him if he is going by himself. His uncle almost teasingly replies, "Why do I feel like a fifteen-year-old girl in her first miniskirt?"³¹ Even with this approach, a young adult reader can learn about homosexuality by reading *The Arizona Kid*.

A more recent author, Francesca Lia Block, has become a controversial author for gay/lesbian teens: "Block continues to push at the limitations of 'appropriate' content in young adult books: she portrays transsexual, gay, and lesbian characters; she includes young people who drink alcohol and use/abuse drugs; and she describes sex explicitly and symbolically to convey both passion and emotional sterility."³² Block's stories are vivid and leave nothing to the imagination. She is controversial because she broaches topics that many parents do not want their young adults to know or think about. Many of her books have been on censorship lists.

Weetzie Bat, an ALA Best Book for Young Adult award winner in 1990, was challenged in the Montgomery County Texas Library System in January of 2002. The group that wanted the book pulled did not approve of the fact that "Weetzie Bat follows the title character and her gay friend Dirk as they find true love."³³

Girl Goddess # 9 contains nine separate stories that express "Feminism in a quiet way, female characters are at the center of each story, and, ultimately, each story celebrates the heroism with which these girls/women meet the challenges of their lives."³⁴ Block uses homosexuals as both secondary and main characters in her young adult novels to express her ideas and views on a variety of issues surrounding alternative lifestyles.

What makes this young adult novel so controversial is that the stories vary in appropriate reading and maturity level. There are a few stories in this novel that could be appropriate for a mature teenager. However, the majority of the stories reflected in this novel require the maturity level of an older audience. *The Horn Book Magazine* listed *Girl Goddess # 9* for older readers yet

listed it as "Ages 12 through Young Adult."³⁵ Younger teens, for example, may understand what a transsexual is but not understand the implications of how one becomes a transsexual and why someone would choose to do so.

CONCLUSIONS

There will always be those who would prefer that librarians not serve the young adult population by using YA novels to inform them about issues such as homosexuality. "Adults have been eager to have the genre moralize, to perform a social service, while the adolescent has been eager for an understanding of society and his/her emerging, if continuing sexuality."³⁶ With these conflicting viewpoints it is not surprising that many librarians face difficult decisions when it comes to collection development in their young adult sections.

Nevertheless, the need for young adult novels that help with self-identification is great. "Some studies indicate that males may first be aware of being erotically attracted to other males as early as age twelve, and that same-sex erotic attraction by females can happen as early as age fourteen."³⁷ These young adults who are struggling with their sexual identity can learn from the literature that librarians place in their hands. "Particularly in the case of young adults, fiction can broaden their experiences and help them to understand different people and lifestyles."³⁸

The role of the librarian should be to evaluate the books before selection of any young adult novel with a homosexual theme. "Does it give an accurate, sympathetic picture of gays for nongays, so that they can learn to appreciate and not fear differences in sexual and affectional preference; does it give young gays a clear view of the decisions facing them and show that these can be made successfully?"³⁹ The librarian's personal views about homosexuality are irrelevant; "we have an obligation to provide our gay students with the same resources as we do other minority students."⁴⁰

It is important to remember that the young adult collection serves teens as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. The literature can help to inform, calm, reassure, and inspire them along the way. "Teenage library users deserve to be taken seriously and to have their requests treated equitably and their confidentiality preserved."⁴¹ Every library should strive to meet the needs of its users regardless of the issue involved. With authors using secondary and main characters to express homosexuality in their young adult novels, it is the librarian's responsibility to be conscious of the message that these different approaches convey. In order to best serve the different needs of teenage patrons, librarians must make reading recommendations and collection development deci-

sions with these differences very much in mind because "Library services can be pivotal to a teenager's well being."⁴²

NOTES

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⁶ Cart, Michael. 40.

⁷ Cockett, Lynn. 23.

⁸ Cart, Michael. 41.

⁹ Cart, Michael. 41.

¹⁰ Cart, Michael. 41.

¹¹ Cart, Michael. 40.

¹² Rennison, Louise. Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging: Confessions of Georgia Nicolson. London: HarperTempest, 1999, 61.

¹³ Rennison, Louise. 109-110

¹⁴ Wolff, Virginia Euwer. True Believer: A Novel in the Make Lemonade Trilogy. New York: Simon Pulse, 2001. 197.

¹⁵ Wolff, Virginia, Euwer. 200.

¹⁶ Wolf, Virginia Euwer. 259.

¹⁷ Crutcher, Chris. Ironman. New York: Dell Laurel-Leaf, 1995. 91.

¹⁸ Crutcher, Chris. 91.

¹⁹ Crutcher, Chris. 124.

²⁰ Crutcher, Chris. 126.

²¹ Cart, Michael. 127.

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²³ St. Clair, Nancy. "Outside Looking In: Representations of Gay and Lesbian Experiences in the Young Adult Novel." The ALAN Review. 23.1 (1995): 42.

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²⁵ Lane, David. 18.

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²⁷ St Clair, Nancy. 126.

²⁸ Cart, Michael. 42.

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³⁰ St. Clair, Nancy. 42.

³¹ Koertge, Ron. The Arizona Kid. Boston: Joy Street Books, 1988. 157.

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³³ B.G. Censorship Watch. American Libraries. 34.3 (March 2003) : 15.

³⁴ Mercier, Cathryn M. 742.

³⁵ Mercier, Cathryn M. 742.

³⁶ St. Clair, Nancy. 40.

³⁷ Carroll, Pamela Sissi. 30.

³⁸ Cockett, Lynn. 32.

³⁹ Cunningham, John and Frances Hanckel. "Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?" Wilson Library Bulletin (March 1976) : 533.

⁴⁰ St. Clair, Nancy. 43.

⁴¹ Directions for Library Service to Young Adults. 2nd ed. Young Adult Library Services Association. New York: American Library Association, 1993. 5.

⁴² Directions for Library Service to Young Adults. 2nd ed.

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