



Literature for Today's Gay and Lesbian Teens: Subverting the Culture of Silence

Author(s): Terry L. Norton and Jonatha W. Vare

Source: *The English Journal*, Vol. 94, No. 2, Subversive English (Nov., 2004), pp. 65-69

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4128776>

Accessed: 13/09/2011 11:53

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The English Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Terry L. Norton and Jonatha W. Vare

Literature for Today's Gay and Lesbian Teens: Subverting the Culture of Silence

University professors Terry L. Norton and Jonatha W. Vare recommend several books that provide positive, hopeful portrayals of contemporary gay and lesbian adolescents, their friends, and their families. They contend that using books such as these that depict the diversity of the population may lead to greater understanding and inclusion.

More than three decades have passed since John Donovan's 1969 gay-themed novel *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* first appeared. Although a milestone because of its purported taboo content, the work received criticism because it implicitly reinforced negative societal views of homosexuality. Literature for gay and lesbian young adults, however, has changed significantly during the intervening years to subvert unflattering images and provide more hopeful depictions for an audience still vulnerable to overt and covert homophobia.

Earlier Literature for Gay and Lesbian Teens

In 1976, Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham noted that in four groundbreaking novels containing discussions of homosexuality the main characters were all male and that one significant character died in each book: John Donovan's 1969 *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*; Isabelle Holland's 1972 *The Man without a Face*; Lynn Hall's 1972 *Sticks and Stones*; and Sandra Scoppettone's 1974 *Trying Hard to Hear You*. These works left readers with the overall impression that homosexuality led to a dire outcome and that being gay had no lasting importance, that it was just a phase one might pass through during adolescence (532–33).

In a 1984 article published in *English Journal*, David E. Wilson analyzed seven books accessible to gay and lesbian young adults and found more positive depictions of homosexuality presented to this audience (see fig. 1). Wilson concluded that in four

of the seven selections—*Annie on My Mind*; *Dance on My Grave*; *Young, Gay, and Proud*; and *One Teenager in Ten*—gay and lesbian young adults could find needed and deserved “affirmation” (62). He also concluded that “more books with healthy, happy homosexual characters need to be written, published, and made available to young adults” (62).

In contrast to Wilson's literary sampling, none of the books in Hanckel and Cunningham's discussion contained much that was life-affirming for potential readers. However, both articles expressed a need for more books with positive content.

The Reality of Lives Lived by Gay and Lesbian Youth

As Dennis A. Anderson notes, perhaps the major developmental crisis faced by gay and lesbian adolescents occurs when they attempt to establish an identity in a society that devalues their sexual orientation (20–21). Devaluation may take the form of denigration. Through defaming or vilifying members of

FIGURE 1. David E. Wilson's List (1984)

-
- Sasha Alyson, ed., *Young, Gay, and Proud* (1980)
 - Aidan Chambers, *Dance on My Grave* (1982)
 - B. A. Ecker, *Independence Day* (1983)
 - Aaron Fricke, *Reflections of a Rock Lobster* (1981)
 - Nancy Garden, *Annie on My Mind* (1982)
 - Ann Heron, ed., *One Teenager in Ten* (1983)
 - Edmund White, *A Boy's Own Story* (1982)
-

minorities perceived as other than "normal," a term often equated with "preferable," majority groups preserve their sense of status and acceptability. A more subtle form of devaluation is silence. It partakes of

Through defaming or vilifying members of minorities perceived as other than "normal," a term often equated with "preferable," majority groups preserve their sense of status and acceptability.

what the French social anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic violence," that is, the "gentle, hidden form which violence takes when overt violence is impossible" (196). Whereas denigration is an open strategy to condemn or harm, silence is covert in its lack of acknowledgment that others exist who are different from what the

majority prefers. Its technique is to ignore and thereby to marginalize and delegitimize persons excluded (Fine and Weis 1). Ultimately, silencing is power and control masked in another guise.

Despite the fact that numerous books have appeared about gay and lesbian young adults since Donovan's 1969 work, this group still faces overt and covert homophobia. Harmful consequences for this population include depression; inadequate school performance; truancy; dropping out of school; running away from home; substance abuse; treatment by mental health professionals, including hospitalization for psychiatric disorders; suicide attempts and completion; being victims of hate and violence; and increased risk for HIV infection and AIDS (Vare and Norton 328–29).

Expectations for Today's Literature

Books today may reflect the kinds of difficulties documented above that are faced by gay and lesbian teens. Nonetheless, precisely because these societal problems have not disappeared, young adult books for this audience should possess life-affirming characteristics advocated for, but often absent from, the literature published in the '60s, '70s, and '80s. Below are some recommendations for what the content of such literature should contain. While no one book should bear the burden of all the suggestions, teachers should ensure that adolescent readers have access to these resources.

Certainly realistic selections should offer positive role models to readers and should contain, within a context of literary quality, issues relevant to gay and lesbian teens, as Dennis Sumara has posited (30–31).

That is, books should have well-developed characters, logical plots, believable settings, appropriate writing style, and worthy themes. Resolutions to problems should be plausible or, as George Calhoun Jr. has stated in discussing guidelines for bibliotherapy, books "should be realistic, honest, and entail goals that are reachable" (942). Wilson has suggested that books should contain diverse portrayals of gays and lesbians and thereby accurately reflect that they are as diverse a population as heterosexuals (62).

One important way to affirm sexual orientation and identity is for books to promote inclusion, showing gays and lesbians as part of the everyday pattern of life. Such an approach provides validation through the characters' nonemphatic visibility, an underlying premise in literature regarding heterosexuals. By no means, however, should selections present homosexuality within the sole setting of AIDS. As John D. Anderson has noted, such presentation "is inadequate and dishonest, and it can easily lead heterosexual students to view this horrible disease as simply a problem for gay people" (154). The books discussed below offer positive, realistic depictions of gay and lesbian youth as they struggle to form identities within homophobic settings.

Some Recommended Titles

Geography Club by Brent Hartinger
(New York: Harper, 2003)

No one is "out" at Goodkind High School, and Russel Middlebrook believes he is the only gay teen at the school. Then Russel locates a gay peer, Kevin Land, in an online chat room. Soon after, Russel learns that his female friend, Min, is bisexual and has a lesbian relationship with Terese. Together with Min's gay friend, Ike, the five teens form a support group whose true identity is hidden from other students at Goodkind High by its name, the "Geography Club." Russel joins the baseball team with the handsome and popular Kevin, and the two develop a secret romantic relationship. After Russel hits a home run and he, too, begins to enjoy sudden popularity, several crises occur. First, Russel's friend, Gunnar, arranges heterosexual double dates for the two of them, and Russel encounters pressure from his date, Trish, to have sex. Next, the male athletes mercilessly torment and humiliate Brian Bund, the lone social outcast in the school. Min urges the Geography Club to accept

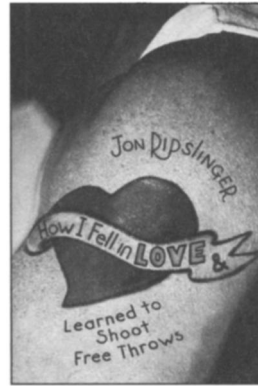
Brian as a member, but Kevin, Terese, and Russel resist. Later, sensing identification with Brian's plight, Russel befriends the outcast and jeopardizes his romantic relationship with Kevin. The final chapters describe the process by which Russel makes the difficult choices that resolve his identity crisis and determine the direction of his future friendships.

Gravel Queen by Tea Benduhn
(New York: Simon, 2003)

This story of friendship and emerging sexual identity revolves around a small clique of teenage adolescents comprising two females, Aurin and Kenney, and their male companion, Fred. Aurin and Kenney appear to be best friends, but Aurin silently finds some of Kenney's personality characteristics distasteful. Although Fred is openly gay with Aurin and Kenney, he disguises his sexual orientation with others and is cautious about disclosing his identity to new friends. Fred harbors a secret crush on a good-looking athlete named Grant, and early in the novel the group enlarges the clique, accepting Grant and his cousin, Neila, into its social circle. Kenney serves as matchmaker, and Fred soon learns that Grant is attracted to him as well. To her surprise, Aurin realizes that she is sexually attracted to Neila, who encourages a romance to develop between them. When Aurin reveals her sexual orientation and breaks off her friendship with Kenney, Kenney is devastated by the loss. After a good deal of introspection and reflection, Aurin and Kenney realize that they value their friendship and make amends. The developing romance between Aurin and Neila and the complications between Aurin and Kenney provide interest, but the author's frequent use of hypothetical movie scripts as a characterization technique may require intertextual connections possessed by more advanced readers.

How I Fell in Love and Learned to Shoot Free Throws by Jon Ripslinger
(Brookfield: Roaring Brook, 2003)

Danny Henderson plays multiple sports at Big River High School in eastern Iowa, but his mediocre shooting skill in basketball gives him an excuse to see the object of his desire, Angel McPherson. Called "Stone Angel," she is new to the school but has rapidly established her reputation as a talented basketball player and earned a nickname reflecting her icy coolness and aloof demeanor. When Danny asks Angel to give him



lessons in shooting free throws, she reluctantly agrees but breaks her ankle in a collision with Danny at their first practice session. At Angel's home, Danny meets her mother and "Aunt Diane." Danny's father warns him to stay away from Angel, but he pursues her with determination,

and she agrees to carry on a clandestine relationship. Soon Danny learns the reason behind Angel's stony silence and secretive behavior. Diane is really the third lover of Angel's mother, and the two live together in a lesbian relationship. After Danny tells his father, the secret is overheard by others, and Angel's high school peers ridicule Danny and Angel with accusations and name-calling. Both Danny and Angel have an additional secret, however, and they realize that honesty is fundamental to a trusting relationship. Once Danny and Angel share their deeply hidden secrets with one another, they find a sense of freedom and learn that friends and family support their open romance.

Keeping You a Secret by Julie Anne Peters
(New York: Little, 2003)

As a high school senior, Holland Jaeger seems to have it all. She is smart, athletic, talented, and president of the student body. To top it off, her boyfriend, Seth, is a popular, academically successful student-body leader as well. For several months Seth and Holland have shared a sexual relationship that appears to be headed for a future, long-term commitment. Then Holland meets Cecelia Goddard, a new student in her art class, and things begin to change. First, Holland discovers that she has a real talent for drawing, and Mr. McElwain, her teacher, encourages her to pursue career-related studies in art. Second, Holland realizes that she is intensely attracted to Cece, a lesbian who proudly proclaims her sexual orientation by wearing slogans on T-shirts and attempting to start an LGBT club at their high school. As Holland waffles between her commitment to Seth

That is, books should have well-developed characters, logical plots, believable settings, appropriate writing style, and worthy themes.

and attraction to Cece, she reflects deeply on her life and recalls her past attractions to other girls. Until this point, Holland has never acted on her desires. As sex with Seth becomes more and more dissatisfying, Holland resolves to make a romantic connection with Cece and break off the relationship with Seth. Cece reciprocates Holland's feelings but urges Holland to keep her identity closeted to keep her safe from ridicule and torment by others. To their dismay, someone outs Holland, and she appears to lose everyone but Cece. Hurt by their breakup, Seth refuses to be friends, and Holland's female friends, in whom she has not confided, ignore her as well. A devastating blow comes when Holland's mother forces her to leave their home, and she has to seek shelter at a safe house for the homeless. An especially valuable aspect of the novel is the realistic and understanding portrayal of the process of disclosure that Holland and Cece face each time they must decide when and how to reveal their identities to another person.

Kissing Kate by Lauren Myracle
(New York: Dutton, 2003)



Lissa and Kate have been best friends for four years before the night they attend a party, drink a bit too much, and kiss in a secluded gazebo. After that night, an awkward tension prevents the two from resuming their former friendship. While Lissa struggles with her strong feelings for Kate, she meets a new friend, Kimberly, who creates her own nickname, "Ariel," to match her offbeat appearance and personality. At first Kate resists Ariel's friendly overtures, thinking that the two girls have little in common. Then Ariel introduces Lissa to her male friend, Finn, and the three teens begin to hang out together. When Finn asks Lissa out for pizza, she agrees to go but realizes that they can only be friends. Kate pressures Lissa to resume their friendship, and things between them come to a head. Lissa reveals the strength of her desire for Kate, but Kate insists that she cannot respond in a romantic way. Lissa is distraught and turns to Ariel for emotional comfort, confiding her secret crush on Kate. Ariel shares a secret, too, telling Lissa that she really likes Finn. As the two

girls deepen their friendship, Ariel helps Lissa to realize that she can use her dreams to discover lessons that help her cope with the pain of unrequited love.

Stitches by Glen Huser
(Toronto, ON: Groundwood, 2003)



Travis lives with his Aunt Kitaleen, Uncle Mike, and younger cousins in a trailer park on the outskirts of a small Midwestern town. The son of an absent father, Travis sees his mother, Gentry, infrequently when she returns to town from road trips as a singer for a country-and-western band. Travis is an artistic, sensitive, and perceptive youth who aspires to become a professional puppeteer. Shon Docker and other school bullies notice Travis's differences, take delight in tormenting him, and make him afraid to be caught alone. While attending Mavis Buttrley Junior High School, Travis is fortunate to encounter both English and home economics teachers who encourage his abilities to write plays, design costumes, and sew outfits for dolls made into puppets. Another characteristic that highlights Travis's differences from his peers is that his best friend is a girl, Chantelle, a social outcast who has been physically disabled since birth. Chantelle shares Travis's love and talent for drama, and together they make plans to stage a puppet performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for ninth-grade graduation. A crisis occurs when Shon and a gang of bullies capture Travis and cause him physical harm, but Chantelle's brothers come to Travis's rescue and the bullies receive their well-deserved, legal consequences. A related undercurrent throughout the novel is Travis's gradual realization that he is attracted to other males. The story concludes with Gentry's supporting her son's move to a large city, where he attends a fine arts school and begins to develop close male friendships.

What Happened to Lani Garver by Carol Plum-Ucci
(San Diego: Harcourt, 2002)

Carol Plum-Ucci's second novel is an intriguing, honest portrayal of complex teenage issues as they occur in an island town in the Northeast. Claire McKenzie is a popular high school cheerleader whose junior high

about with leukemia is in remission. However, Claire's recent development of a mild eating disorder has led to weight loss and a sudden onset of dizzy spells. When Claire begins to entertain secret worries about a recurrence of cancer, she fortuitously meets Lani Garver, an unusual new student. Lani is strangely attractive, but his androgynous features generate curiosity and prejudicial behavior from the student body. Claire intuitively senses that Lani is a kindred spirit and immediately befriends him. The enigmatic Lani reciprocates by taking her to seek medical and psychological help in a large city close to the island. A mystical overtone enters the story when a medical worker compares Lani to a type of angel who floats among humans to make their lives better. Events do turn out well for Claire as she learns that her cancer is still in remission, gains psychological help in combating her eating disorder, and makes new urban friends who share her musical talent and interest. Lani, however, does not fare as well. Claire discovers that Lani's embattled history includes running away from home to escape discrimination and torment, and the past begins to repeat itself on Hackett Island. A group of male bullies is led by Tony Clementi, a closeted gay teen who secretly propositions Lani but openly claims that Lani has solicited sex from him. The story climaxes when the group of bullies attempts to drown Claire and Lani. Although Claire escapes and each of the bullies reaps his own particular type of justice, Lani's fate is never definitively resolved. Claire is left with a copy of Lani's favorite book, the rare and expensive *Andovenes' Angels*, as a memento of her unusual friend.

Conclusion

This sampling of recent titles represents a balance of male and female characters and is refreshing in the portrayals of gay and lesbian teens facing challenges of growing up that many adolescents experience. The works honestly depict complications deriving from relationships among peers, whether platonic or romantic, or conflicts arising among young adults and parents or caretakers. Furthermore, the books do not sugarcoat social settings such as schools where these stories primarily take place. Characters who are out about their orientation, whether voluntarily or not, fre-

quently face rejection by heterosexual peers or parents; one character has to seek shelter in a house for the homeless. Bullying also can become a serious problem. However, the novels show for the most part the successful resolution of identity crises by the major characters. Each story concerns isolation, disclosure, and varying degrees of inclusion that derive from inner strength and peer support. Unlike many of the books of an earlier time, these newer ones do not preordain their gay and lesbian characters to tragic outcomes.

While literature may not eliminate homophobia nor alleviate the risks stemming from it, well-written books may help subvert the culture of silence still current in many school environments and offer a supportive framework for self-understanding by gay and lesbian teens. Moreover, books such as the ones discussed here may help heterosexual students who are homophobic question their traditional assumptions in order to lead lives not bound and threatened by prejudices and fears. These recent works will generally affirm the lives of gay and lesbian teens and may expand the horizons of their heterosexual peers.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Dennis A. "Lesbian and Gay Adolescents: Social and Developmental Considerations." *The Gay Teen: Educational Practice and Theory for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents*. Ed. Gerald Unks. New York: Routledge, 1995. 17–28.
- Anderson, John D. "School Climate for Gay and Lesbian Students and Staff Members." *Phi Delta Kappan* 76.2 (1994): 151–54.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.
- Calhoun, George, Jr. "Enhancing Self-Perception through Bibliotherapy." *Adolescence* 22.88 (1987): 939–43.
- Fine, Michelle, and Lois Weis. Introduction. *Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools*. Ed. Lois Weis and Michelle Fine. Albany: State U of New York P, 1993. 1–6.
- Hanckel, Frances, and John Cunningham. "Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?" *Wilson Library Bulletin* 50.7 (1976): 528–34.
- Sumara, Dennis. "Gay and Lesbian Voices in Literature: Making Room on the Shelf." *English Quarterly* 25.1 (1993): 30–34.
- Vare, Jonatha W., and Terry L. Norton. "Understanding Gay and Lesbian Youth: Sticks, Stones, and Silence." *The Clearing House* 71.6 (1998): 327–31.
- Wilson, David E. "The Open Library: YA Books for Gay Teens." *English Journal* 73.7 (1984): 60–63.

Terry L. Norton is professor of education at Winthrop University, where he teaches courses in literature for children and young adults. He is coauthor of *Literacy Strategies: Resources for Beginning Teachers, 1–6* (Pearson, 2004). *email*: nortont@winthrop.edu. **Jonatha W. Vare** is also professor of education at Winthrop University. She teaches courses in educational psychology and directs the Center for Pedagogy in the Richard W. Riley College of Education. *email*: varej@winthrop.edu.