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Collecting to the Core — GLBTI Memoirs

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

Humanity has a strong impulse towards storytelling and one of the most commonly told stories is that of a life. **Plutarch** promoted personal stories as "a sort of looking-glass in which [we] may see how to adjust and adorn [our lives.]"¹ Readers looking for examples have many memoirs from which to choose. Indeed, genre growth has been explosive; **Bowker** reported a 108 percent increase in biographical works between 2002 and 2011.² While the growth is encouraging, the numbers reveal very little about the genre. For example: how many memoirs are about African Americans? Authors? Business persons? Gays and lesbians? Women? If, as **tatiana de la tierra** asserts, people enter libraries looking for themselves, to see their culture and community reflected in literature, then memoirs are central to collection development.³ In academic libraries, this centrality is augmented by the need to support the curriculum, and memoirs can serve as useful interdisciplinary educational tools, documenting history, providing personal narratives that give insight into social events, and facilitating identity and self-discovery. Librarians seeking to enhance biographical collections could benefit from more detailed information about the genre. Subject cataloging assists genre analysis and discovery, but cataloging has limitations, particularly for historically marginalized groups such as the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (GLBTI) community. For example, television personality **Ellen DeGeneres** is a well-known lesbian, yet the **Cataloging in Publication** record omits this information from her recent memoir *Seriously — I'm Kidding*, and omissions like this hinder the identification of GLBTI memoirs.⁴ This essay offers a partial remedy to the difficulty of locating GLBTI memoirs by suggesting important titles for an academic collection and exploring these works within the context of personal identity.

Prior to the gay liberation movement, dedicated GLBTI biographies or memoirs were virtually nonexistent. The tide turned with **Jane Rule's** 1975 work *Lesbian Images*, which focuses on the lives and works of lesbian authors. **Rule** was concerned with

"...exploring...writing in relation to personal experience and the discover[y] of what images of lesbians women writers have projected in fiction, biography, and autobiography."⁵ As a study of lesbian identity and character, *Lesbian Images* remains a significant work. Replicating **Rule's** approach, **David Bergman's** *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* examines the works of gay men in an effort to create a "gay genealogy of representation."⁶ He asserts that gay self-representation is heavily influenced by a sense of otherness, of being an outsider, and an urgent need to be understood. **Bergman's** conclusions are notable for providing another powerful *raison d'être* for GLBTI memoir, specifically to preserve individual identity in a community historically lacking a traditional familial structure by which memories are passed between generations.

Rule's and **Bergman's** foundational efforts focused widely on examinations of authors and texts for representations of personal identity. Inevitably, personal narratives were analyzed using varying theoretical approaches, predominately gender theory, and monographs became narrower in scope. **Jeanne Perrault** recast memoir within the context of feminism in *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autobiography*.⁷ Reading the "textual configurations of subjectivity," **Perrault** demonstrated the reciprocal influences of self and community, concluding that personal narratives can be political acts. **Bertram Cohler** explored socio-cultural influences on the writings of twentieth-century gay males in *Writing Desire: Sixty Years of Gay Autobiography*.⁸ Dividing the writings by decade, **Cohler**, a psychoanalyst, identified the psychological impact on personal identity of the classification and declassification (in 1973) of homosexuality as a mental disorder. He observed that autobiographical works penned by authors coming of age before the declassification reflected self-loathing, a struggle for self-acceptance, and a sense of disconnectedness. Conversely, the works of later authors were more open and personal, demonstrating individuals within larger societal roles, such as members of families and communities. **Cohler's** text was notable for considering the role of Internet-based self-writing as a safe space to work out personal identity before revealing same-sex desires in face-to-face interactions.

Openly sharing same-sex desires, or "coming out," has resulted in a large body of memoirs. This type of memoir is clearly unique to the GLBTI community, and the coming out narrative is particularly powerful due to its personal nature and multiple purposes: reassuring and supporting individuals in the process of self-discovery as well as contributing to a larger sense of community. Coming out is a

significant enough trope to require a **Library of Congress** subject heading — Coming out (Sexual orientation) — which first appeared in the subject authority file in 1990. Due to the quantity of coming out memoirs, anthologies are an expedient collection development tool. As edited works, the quality of anthologies may be uneven, but this should be overlooked in favor of collecting a diversity of content depicting this important ritual. Early efforts were devoted to a single gender, such as **Stanley and Wolfe's**, *The Coming Out Stories* and **Curtis's** *Revelations: A Collection of Gay Male Coming Out Stories*.⁹⁻¹⁰ A notable exception, *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, by **Nancy and Casey Adair**, began as a documentary film and featured both men and women at a time when gender-inclusive works were few.¹¹ Authors shared coming out stories in **Patrick Merla's** **Lambda Award** finalist *Boys like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories*.¹² Not to be outdone, **Joan Larkin** gathered women's stories in another **Lambda Award** finalist, *A Woman like That: Lesbian and Bisexual Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories*, which remains one of the few titles addressing coming out as bisexual.¹³ While many books contain coming out stories, anthologies solely devoted to the topic for people of color are nearly nonexistent. The African American GLBTI community is the exception; readers will find role models in **Lisa Moore's** *Does Your Mama Know?: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories* and the **Stonewall Award**-winning *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Still Not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, and Coming Home*, edited by **Keith Boykin**.¹⁴⁻¹⁵

The transgender community has also documented the experience of coming out as trans. Historically significant is **Christine Jorgensen's** 1967 self-titled memoir for honestly depicting her transition from male to female.¹⁶ Within three decades, male to female memoirs were commonplace, as exemplified by **Kate Bornstein's** *Gender Outlaw*, which moved beyond chronicling a psychological and medical experience toward cultural criticism and a demand for acceptance.¹⁷ Female to male trans **Loren Cameron** paired this theme with photographs in his double **Lambda Award**-winning *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits*.¹⁸ Commentary, art, and essays from a new generation of transsexuals are found in **Bornstein's** sequel *Gender Outlaw: The Next Generation*.¹⁹

Another group produced an unenviable body of work in the form of the AIDS memoir. **G. Thomas Couser** asserts how the "specter of AIDS overshadowed virtually every personal account authored by [gay] men."²⁰ In addition to relaying a personal story, this format

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also gave authors the opportunity to rage at a society demonizing the afflicted and to excise past ghosts and facilitate reconciliations before death. **Paul Monette's** canon, beginning with the multiple award-winning *Borrowed Time*, belongs in all libraries.²¹ *Borrowed Time* is a deeply intimate love story chronicling the HIV-infected author's two years caring for his partner; later works memorialize lovers and recount **Monette's** health struggle and impending death. Artist **David Wojnarowicz** worked on a graphical biography prior to his death, depicting his gritty life on the street as a prostitute and anger against homophobia through watercolor illustrations in the first graphic novel to address AIDS, *7 Miles a Second*.²² *Heaven's Coast*, a finalist for the **Lambda and Stonewall Awards**, is poet **Mark Doty's** lyrical memoir of his partner's death, a topic which he revisited, along with the company of a canine companion, in his **Stonewall Award-winning** *Dog Years*.²³⁻²⁴

Librarians seeking to balance the collection by including AIDS memoirs by or about people of color will encounter difficulties. Typically, these stories are located within other works, such as a single author's collection of essays or poems, as exemplified in **Essex Hemphill's** **Stonewall Award-winning** *Ceremonies: Prose and Poems*, and anthologies such as the ground-breaking *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, the first anthology devoted entirely to African American AIDS writing.²⁵⁻²⁶ The **Stonewall Honor Book** *Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned*, by **Judd Winick**, is the story of friendship between a Jewish cartoonist and a Cuban American AIDS educator who meet while appearing on reality TV.²⁷ The story's distinctive origins and the Latino protagonist qualify this title for inclusion in GLBTI collections.

The place of graphic novels in an academic library is sometimes questioned, but the increasing availability of nonfiction graphic works circumvents the debate. In the category of GLBTI graphic memoirs **Alison Bechdel** is well regarded. Her 2006 work, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, sets an extremely high standard.²⁸ The expressive, detailed art and literate prose details **Bechdel's** relationship with her father. The accolades afforded *Fun Home* — **Lambda, Stonewall, and Publishing Triangle** awards, **New York Times** bestseller — and its appeal to a wide audience justify including this and other works by **Bechdel** in any collection. **Mia Wolff's** artistic renderings relate the story of science fiction writer **Samuel Delany's** interracial relationship in *Bread and Wine: An Erotic Tale of New York*.²⁹ As an early effort in this category and one of the few featuring a person of color, this title is a unique contribution to collections. **Dylan Edwards** pushes the definition of memoir by combining or slightly altering the life stories of six female to male transsexuals in *Transposes*, a **Lambda Award** finalist.³⁰ **Edwards'** artistic liberties should be forgiven and the

title included in collections due to the paucity of graphic memoirs featuring trans people.

Once stifled by society, the present state of GLBTI memoirs is encouraging: reviews, awards, subject headings, and the 2009 implementation of a BISAC (Book Industry Standards and Communications) code specific to GLBTI memoirs — Biography & Autobiography / Gay & Lesbian — are all indicators of the genre's growth and maturity. While the titles selected here were intentionally chosen to represent the GLBTI community's diversity, the availability of biographical and autobiographical works is

sufficient to warrant recommendations in ever-narrowing areas such as politics, military, sports, entertainment, health, or education. Beyond the prevalent narratives chronicling coming out and AIDS, memoirs exploring other issues related to GLBTI life are emerging, as well as "incidental" memoirs in which the subject's sexuality is not the story's primary

focus. By providing readers with what **Phillip Lopate** called "a reward in the form of a shiver of self recognition," GLBTI memoirs become teaching tools transcending time, place, and culture to aid in personal development and preserve social history.³¹ 🌱



Endnotes

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Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.