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Confessions of a Librarian: Ryan Barnette

Posted on 24 Nov, 2010 by Rachel Wexelbaum

Ryan Barnette is a Library Associate and Assistant Programmer at the Erlanger Branch of the Kenton County Public Library System of Kentucky. Less than twelve miles away from Cincinnati, Erlanger may seem hundreds of miles away when it comes to LGBT civil rights. In spite of this, the Kenton County Public Library system has an excellent collection of LGBT resources thanks to Ryan, gay-friendly librarians, and a community that values the public library as a community resource.



1. What made you decide to become a librarian? How did you get into the profession?

Working in my college library as a student, I realized what a peaceful place it could be for patrons and staff. At its most useful, the library provides the only respite some people will find all day.

My experience at college led to where I work now, at the busiest public library in Kentucky. It's a much noisier and more energetic machine. But I love being surrounded by books and I love helping people relax a little by meeting their information needs.

2. Tell us a little about the town and library where you work. How comfortable do you feel being “out” where you live and where you work? How does this affect your ability and freedom to select LGBTIQ resources for your library?

Though in the shadow of Cincinnati, Erlanger is a small suburb that shares more of the values and ideals of rural Kentucky than the nearby city. The town, and therefore our patrons, are not completely receptive to gay people. And I use “gay” inclusively to mean all LGBTIQ peoples. But our library system is an impressive oasis where many gay people work and visit. I definitely feel comfortable being “out” here. And so does my boyfriend, a patron whom I met through a coworker.

One of my favorite library stories comes from my coworker Melinda, a straight ally who was checking out items for an elderly gay couple, regulars and favorites of the library employees. The lady in line behind the couple was expressing her disgust, sneering and huffing. “How disgusting!” said the lady under her breath but loud enough for all to hear. Melinda looked at the lady sternly with an offended expression. But the couple gained the victory in the tense situation. They shared a subtle yet powerful kiss. Melinda smiled in satisfied alliance.

Our collection reflects the phenomenon above. The community doesn’t prioritize or really even provide gay resources, but the library ensures that they are present and visible.

3. How do you select LGBTIQ resources for your library? Do you receive input from any other librarians or community members, or are you the sole selector for LGBTIQ resources where you work?

I select resources based on reviews I’ve read or suggestions from friends or coworkers. While I select many books, movies, and albums with gay subjects, I’m definitely not the sole selector. I am often surprised to find that our library system already owns titles for which I’m searching. Members of our staff, including those in collection services, understand the necessity of selecting gay materials. My coworker Melinda selects many more gay titles than I do, proving the importance of straight allies.

But our patrons request hundreds of items per month through [our website](#). They are the heart of collection services, and that includes selection of our gay resources.

4. Depending on your town’s climate, how have you been able to promote LGBTIQ resources from your library’s collection? Have parents, teachers, administrators or others ever complained about the presence of those resources?

I recently selected gay materials for a Pride Month display on our largest table. It circulated over 60 items and drew only one complaint from a patron. But knowing the town’s climate, library administration requested that the display be placed “away from the front entrance and children’s area.” This statement illustrates the town’s lack of tolerance and, unfortunately, hesitance to confront ignorance and fear.

5. What advice do you have for public librarians who would like to select LGBTIQ resources for their collections—especially if they live and work in conservative areas of the country? What are your favorite selection aids for LGBTIQ materials? How do you acquire your LGBTIQ titles?

Listen and observe. What are the needs of your specific community? Here in Erlanger we have teens that hunger for affirmation of their sexual identity, so they check out books by Alex Sanchez and albums by musical artists like Mika, Rufus Wainwright, or Lady Gaga.

Start slowly by blending gay resources throughout the library. Isherwood next to Ishiguro. Once you have built a good, varied collection, make it visible. You have that right and your patrons have the right to the materials.

I use Goodreads and NoveList most often to find books to add to our collection. Both online resources are full of creative lists, suggestions, and reviews.

6. Is your library experiencing the budget crises that are affecting many other public libraries in the United States? How is this affecting your ability to develop the library collection? Has there been resistance from administration to order new titles in “controversial” subject areas due to budget problems?

We are a very fortunate library system in that we have only slightly felt the economic woes. Thankfully, the county appreciates our presence.

7. Has your library invested in EBooks or EReaders? Are you aware of any LGBTIQ resources available as EBooks?

The library has recently begun to research and invest in eReaders. We have bought an Apple iPad, Sony Reader, and Barnes & Noble NOOK. For now, staff is trying out the products to learn how they work and which we prefer before they become available to patrons. Our staff is finding the Sony Reader the most accessible and enjoyable eReader so far.

We have provided eBooks for a few years now. While searching for eBooks in our collection, there is only one result when you browse Gay/Lesbian titles. However, a little exploring will produce plenty of gay writers. Barnes & Noble World Digital Library publishes many of these writers, such as Virginia Woolf (*The Voyage Out*) and Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest*). But there are contemporary options as well in the collection, namely David Sedaris (*When You Are Engulfed in Flames*), Gregory Maguire (*Wicked*), and Mark Doty (*Dog Years*).

8. Are you yourself an EBook reader? If budget allowed, would you subscribe to any EBook collections for your library?

I am too attached to print materials to make the switch. I love the tangible reality of a book. I love browsing the stacks. Where do you think I first noticed my boyfriend?

9. If you ever had to sell your personal book collection, what is the ONE LGBTIQ title that you would keep, and perhaps pass on to someone of the next generation?

Love Speaks Its Name: Gay and Lesbian Love Poems is a thorough anthology of poetry edited by J.D. McClatchy. I would definitely choose a poetry anthology for its re-readability. This one includes some of my favorites, such as Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 29” and Mark Doty’s “The Embrace.” The fact that these two poets are included shows the range of this anthology.

Please contact Ryan at Ryan.Barnette@kentonlibrary.org for more information about LGBT collection development and visibility of LGBT resources in public libraries.

