

GLBTQ TEEN LITERATURE: IS IT OUT THERE IN INDIANA?

by Jennifer Chance Cook



ABSTRACT

Fiction resources for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning (GLBTQ) youth are often difficult to find. Many libraries do not make a conscious effort to collect such materials, and some actually make an effort to avoid doing so. This is an extremely troubling pattern, since GLBTQ teens are a group that is desperately in need of strong support from caring adults. This article describes a preliminary study that explored whether such titles are available to Indiana's teens.

BACKGROUND

Research studies estimate that as many as one in ten people is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (Endersbe, 2000, p. 8). An even higher percentage of young people may question their sexuality as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. GLBTQ teens grow up in a world that often assumes that they are heterosexual and one that poses both physical and psychological dangers. The need for role models and social support consistently comes up in the literature regarding services for GLBTQ youth.

Providing young adults with literature that features GLBTQ characters and themes helps homosexual youth to find role models and to recognize that they are not alone (Webunder and Woodard, 1996). Additionally, such literature offers heterosexual youth a way to experience diversity and broaden their understanding of what life is like for their homosexual peers. In Sanelli and Perreault's 2001 study, GLBTQ youth consistently expressed a desire to have "more books" with homosexual characters and themes.

METHODOLOGY

A list of 24 titles published in the U.S. between 1996 and 2000 was compiled from the children's and young adult novels listed in the annotated bibliography *Lesbian and Gay Voices* (Day, 2000). All of the works included in Day's bibliography are well-reviewed, present positive views of GLBTQ characters or themes,

and are available in English. More than two-thirds of the 24 selected novels (Appendix A) include homosexual teen characters, while the remainder involve teens who have homosexual friends and family members.

Following the method suggested by Coley (2002), searches for the selected titles were made in forty-two county public library catalogs in Indiana. The sample was one of convenience and consisted of those county library systems with web-accessible OPACs. These libraries are located throughout the state and represent urban, suburban and rural communities with patrons who span the socioeconomic spectrum.

RESULTS

Of the forty-two Indiana library systems selected for this study, the vast majority had at least one title on the list. However, half of the systems held fewer than five of the twenty-four selected titles, and nine of those systems did not include a single one of these well-reviewed novels in their collection. Eleven of the sample library systems held ten or more titles and four held at least twenty titles, with the largest number of titles held being 22.

These novels were found in various sections of the libraries that held them. In fact, three of the selected novels could be found in children's, young adult/teen, and adult sections depending on the library system. While the novels selected for the test list were all ones which Day's bibliography listed as recommended for young adults, fifteen of the novels were placed in the adult section of at least one of the sample libraries. Additionally, seven of the titles appear in the children's section of one or more libraries.

All twenty-four of the sample titles were found in the catalog of at least one Indiana county public library system. However, only eight titles were held by at least one-third of the sample library systems and only one title, the Printz Honor Book and Eliot Rosewater Award nominee *Hard Love*, was held by over half of the library systems.

Table 1: Library Holdings Averages*

	Mean	Median
Number of Volumes	14.9	4.5
Number of Titles	6.7	4
Adult Titles	1.2	0.5
YA/Teen Titles	5.3	2.5
Juvenile Titles	0.6	0

*Note on Table 1: The large difference in the mean and median number of volumes is due to the sizable collections of the county library systems which serve our larger cities. The median is a better reflection of the number of volumes held in most Indiana county library systems.

DISCUSSION

Researchers have identified three primary reasons that young adults have difficulty accessing fiction with GLBTQ themes. Firstly, these works represent only a very small percentage of the market for young adult novels, less than 1% of the total number of titles. Secondly, many libraries do not make a concerted effort to collect what materials are available in this area. Finally, when such works are collected, shelving and cataloging choices frequently inhibit the ability of teens to access them (Clyde and Lobban, 2001.)

While libraries have limited control over how many GLBTQ themed books are written and published, we are in control of which titles are selected for inclusion in our collections and how thoroughly they are cataloged. It is those two factors that were examined in this study.

It is disappointing, although not altogether surprising, that most of the library systems in the sample held only a few of the well-written and well reviewed novels that made up the test list for this study. The data indicate that Hoosier librarians, like their counterparts in other regions, exhibit a tendency to self-censor by not collecting so-called “controversial” books.

Clyde and Lobban (2001) showed that in many places, those works that do make it into the collection are sometimes placed on restricted shelving or cataloged as adult materials, making it more difficult for teens to access them.

These trends were observable in the libraries selected for this study. One particular library system placed ten of the eighteen titles that it held in the adult section. The remaining libraries placed anywhere from zero to five titles in the adult section of the library, although in some cases titles were placed in both adult and teen sections, reflecting a broader readership.

Three of the titles (*Girl Walking Backwards*, *Coachella*, and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*) were

consistently placed in the adult section of each of the libraries that held them. This might be a reflection of the book genuinely having an adult audience as well as appealing to teens, or it could reflect a publishing industry trend of marking GLBTQ novels as the territory of adult fiction.

One final, and much more subtle, barrier to access is incomplete cataloging. While many of the studied libraries did indeed include subject headings such as “homosexuality – fiction” or “lesbians – fiction” in the catalog records for several of the titles, much room for improvement was observed. Most tellingly, five of the selected titles were not given any such subject heading by any of the sample libraries.

CONCLUSION

Although a few county library systems have obviously made a concerted effort to collect young adult literature with GLBTQ characters and themes, Indiana as a whole is not doing a sufficient job of providing literature for the GLBTQ teen population.

Quality works must be sought out, included in our collections and cataloged in such a way that they are easily identifiable. Librarians that serve young adults can also help to make these types of books more accessible through displays, booklists and awards programs. We also need to bring our catalogers on board and ensure that all books with GLBTQ characters and themes are given appropriate access points that will help teens to locate them more easily.

Because of the extreme pressures on this particular segment of the population, it is important that librarians take an activist stand on this issue. While such activities may open Indiana libraries up to pressures from censors, the stakes are simply too high for the profession to stand aside and do nothing to help this vulnerable section of our young adult population.

Table 2: Total Holdings Per Title

	Volumes	Libraries
Baby Bebop	57	16
My Father's Scar	16	11
Good Moon Rising	20	11
Out of the Shadows	10	6
The Blue Lawn	12	8
Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit	14	9
Breaking Boxes	38	18
Dare Truth or Promise	17	12
The Year They Burned The Books	41	18
"Hello," I Lied	45	19
Blue Coyote	9	5
What I Know Now	19	12
The Necessary Hunger	10	9
Ain't Gonna Be The Same Fool Twice	23	10
Tomorrow Wendy	14	7
Coachella	1	1
Girl Walking Backwards	9	5
The House You Pass On The Way	40	16
If It Doesn't Kill You	21	15
Holly's Secret	18	8
Oasis	21	12
Whistle Me Home	41	19
Hard Love	108	24
Name Me Nobody	21	11

REFERENCES

- Clyde, L.A., et. al., A door half open: young people's access to fiction related to Homosexuality. *School Libraries Worldwide* v. 7 no. 2 (July 2001) p. 17-30
- Coley, K.P. Moving toward a method to test for self-censorship by school library
- Media specialists. *School Library Media Research* v. 5 (2002)
- Day, F.A. *Lesbian and gay voices*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Endersbe, J. *Homosexuality: What does it mean?* Mankato, Minnesota: Capstone Press, 2000.
- Sanelli, M., et. al., "I could be anybody": gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in
- U. S. schools. *NASSP Bulletin* v. 85 no. 622 (February 2001) p. 69-78
- Webunder D., et. al., *Homosexuality in young adult fiction and nonfiction: An annotated bibliography*. *The ALAN Review* v. 23 no. 2 (Winter 1996) <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/winter96/webunder.html>

APPENDIX A: TEST SAMPLE OF 24 GLBTQ TEEN BOOKS

Books with GLBTQ Protagonist:

Baby Be-Bop, Francesca Lia Block
Dare Truth or Promise, Paula Boock
My Father's Scar, Michael Cart
Good Moon Rising, Nancy Garden
The Year They Burned The Books, Nancy Garden
Out of the Shadows, Sue Hines
"Hello," I Lied, M.E. Kerr
Blue Coyote, Liza Ketchum
What I Know Now, Rodger Larson
The Necessary Hunger, Nina Revoyr
Ain't Gonna be the Same Fool Twice, April Sinclair
Tomorrow Wendy, Shelly Stoehr
Coachella, Sheila Ortiz Taylor
The Blue Lawn, William Taylor
Girl Walking Backwards, Bett Williams
Oranges are Not the Only Fruit, Jeanette Winterson
The House You Pass on the Way, Jacqueline Woodson

Books with a Straight Protagonist:

If It Doesn't Kill You, Margaret Bechard
Holly's Secret, Nancy Garden
Breaking Boxes, A.M. Jenkins
Oasis, Gregory Maguire
Whistle Me Home, Barbara Wersba
Hard Love, Ellen Wittlinger
Name Me Nobody, Lois-Ann Yamanaka

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Chance Cook (jchancec@iupui.edu) is an MLS student at IU SLIS in Indianapolis.