LGBTQ Stories We Need to Hear Now

Laura Renzi
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania
lrenzi@wcupa.edu

Young adult literature featuring LGBTQ characters has progressed over the past decades (Renzi, Letcher, and Miraglia). There is a history of portraying LGBTQ characters in young adult literature as victims—being beaten or dying, as in *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* (Greene); or being thrown out of their homes by unaccepting parents, as in *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters). The publication of *Luna* (Peters), *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan), and *Boyfriends with Girlfriends* (Sanchez) indicated a changing literary perspective, wherein LGBTQ youth appear in roles of strong characters who not only survive but also thrive in their self-acceptance. Recently, with the publication of novels such as A. S. King’s *Ask the Passengers* and Steve Brezenoff’s *Brooklyn Burning*, young adult literature is moving beyond the perception that sexuality and gender are the “problem” in the novel, and instead portraying LGBTQ characters as adolescents facing traditional problems rather than being identified as “different.” This could signal a shift in thinking about LGBTQ students, a shift in public opinion (in general), and an evolution in the genre itself.

However, even in the context of all the powerful stories and strong LGBTQ characters, some stories have remained untold, until now. In 2013, three new publications invited readers to explore the experiences of a lesbian couple in Iran, a homosexual male who wants to move beyond the “gay” label and just be one of the boys, and homosexuals in 1940s Germany who are forced to wear the Pink Triangle.

*If You Could Be Mine* by Sara Farizan

Sahar and Nasrin have been in love for as long as they can remember. Sahar, raised by her father after her mother died, struggles to keep her father in the present while studying for the university entrance exam that will make or break her dreams of becoming a doctor. Nasrin, on the other hand, has parents who expect her to continue the culture of the family. Sahir and Nasrin’s stolen moments, forbidden kisses, and hopes for the future are forbidden in Iran. If their secret is revealed, they could be tortured, beaten, or even killed for being homosexual.

When Nasrin’s parents arrange her marriage to a young doctor, Sahar explores other possible options for the couple to be together. She thinks about Nasrin running away with her, and she even considers gender reassignment surgery in a belief that if she were a man she could marry Nasrin and love her openly. Sahar’s love for Nasrin is that strong.

As Sahar spends time with Ali and his friends, she begins to understand who she is and where she fits. Sahar begins to see a life of danger and wonder, a life of love and loss. Farizan’s powerful story of love, culture, and self-acceptance will expose the reader to new cultural perspectives in the LGBTQ international community.

Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

Pauline Schmidt, Column Editor
Openly Straight
by Bill Konigsberg

Seamus Rafael Goodberg, aka Rafe, is tired of being known as the “gay kid.” Rafe has enjoyed the acceptance of his parents and friends in his hometown of Boulder, Colorado. His mom is the president of Boulder’s Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, while Rafe regularly speaks out at local schools about what it is like to be gay. He is the “face of gayness” to the extent that, when his history class studies the civil rights movement, he is asked to present the “gay perspective.” When Rafe looks in the mirror all he sees is GAY GAY GAY.

When he transfers to Natick, a New England private school for boys, Rafe intends “not to be gay.” This doesn’t mean that he isn’t or that he doesn’t know that he is, he just isn’t going to tell anyone that he is gay. He wants to fit in without his sexuality being an issue. Can it work? Rafe thinks so, until he starts spending time with Ben.

In Openly Straight, Konigsberg creates a wonderfully charismatic character. In the end, it was up to Rafe to come to the understanding that it doesn’t matter what others think of him, but only what he thinks of himself.

Branded by the Pink Triangle
by Ken Setterington

In 1939, the German army invaded Austria and began one of the most terrible periods in human history. In Branded by the Pink Triangle, Setterington’s non-fiction text chronicles the capture and torture of homosexuals during World War II in Nazi Germany, a story that is all too often forgotten in classrooms. The author characterizes Berlin as “the Homosexual capital of Europe” in the 1930s. What happened to change that? The mission to create the “perfect” race. As Hitler’s campaign continued, policies were put into place against people who could not help Germany achieve that goal. Homosexual men, in particular, were targeted because of their perceived inferiority in being able to produce strong German children who could fight in wars. Homosexual men were rounded up and in some cases given a choice—castration and enlistment in the German army, or concentration camps where many were tortured and worked to death.

It was in the camps that the Pink Triangle came to symbolize homosexuality. Why the Pink Triangle? No one knows, but homosexuals in the camps were forced to wear the triangle, as Jews were the yellow star. Setterington documents the stories, the tortures, and the policies of Nazi Germany.

These authors provide us with new characters, new voices, and history that is often forgotten. I hope young adult literature continues to push the boundaries of the “typical” LGBTQ character, and that authors provide us with these new voices that we, as readers and educators, need to hear.

Works Cited


Laura Renzi is an associate professor in the English Department at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. She teaches young adult literature courses as well as English education methods courses for preservice teachers.
The Department of English invites applications for continuing status (BYU’s equivalent of tenure)-track positions for appointments beginning Fall 2015 in English Education. Successful candidates will show evidence of excellence in teaching and significant scholarly potential. Rank open. Salary, benefits, and teaching load competitive. Applicants must have at least 3 years middle school, junior high, or high school teaching experience and a Ph.D./Ed.D. in English Education or related field completion expected by starting date. Applications are completed online at http://yjobs.byu.edu (select full-time faculty, then follow the link to ENGLISH Faculty 2015-English Education). Initial applications include the on-line application, cover letter, and vita. These must be submitted by January 4, 2015.

BYU has a dynamic program with more than 200 English teaching majors. The University provides generous teaching and research support. BYU is located in Provo, Utah, in the heart of the Wasatch Mountains, an area famous for its robust lifestyle, scenic beauty and outdoor recreational opportunities.

Brigham Young University, an equal opportunity employer, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, gender, age, national origin, veteran status, or against qualified individuals with disabilities. All faculty are required to abide by the university’s honor code and dress and grooming standards. Preference is given to qualified candidates who are members in good standing of the affiliated church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
SAVE! up to 30%

Prek-12 Checklist
- Common Core ✓
- Paperbacks ✓
- Reading ✓ Collections
- Teacher Guides ✓
- Novel Studies ✓

BMI Bound Books

LOWEST prices!

LARGEST selection!

BEST service!

www.bmionline.com