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# Bold Books for Innovative Teaching

## The Boldest Books

Few educated people in our society today object to public schools using literature about different cultural groups or literature written by women. We have learned the value of books that address the experiences, needs, and interests of a variety of cultural groups and both genders of students in our classrooms. What many people have not yet learned, however, is the value of books that address the experiences, needs, and interests of the most maligned group in our contemporary society: gay teens. (For the purpose of discussion throughout this column, we will use the term *gay* to include both male and female homosexuals as well as bisexuals.)

Books containing gay characters are, in fact, forbidden in many schools in our country. Are there no gay students in our classrooms? Are the religious beliefs and social fears of some people preventing certain students from accessing books they can relate to? What might English teachers do to acknowledge and support gay students in their classrooms and help straight students become more understanding and accepting?

To get some perspective on this problem, I asked C. J. Bott to give us her thoughts. C. J., now a retired classroom teacher, was one of the

organizers of the Gay/Straight Alliance at her high school in Shaker Heights, Ohio—the first such organization in a public school in northern Ohio.

**Don Gallo:** *Why are the emotional and educational needs and interests of gay teens still being ignored in many schools today?*

**C. J. Bott:** Whoa, you jump right into the heat of things, don't you? First, the easy part—gay teens are interested in the same things all teens are: getting an education, being accepted, developing social skills, going to homecoming and the prom, making their parents proud. There are many reasons why gay teens do not get the help they need to do all those things. If you

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asked most educators, the most common response would probably be, "That's not a problem here because we don't have any gay students in this school." And those staff members might actually believe that. I have a colleague who has a teacher friend who is gay, and she had supported him through many difficult moments. When I was helping start our school's Gay/Straight Alliance [GSA], she asked me if there were any gay students in our school. Even with her un-

derstanding, it simply had not occurred to her that there might be gay students in her classes.

Educators have to accept the reality that there are gay students in our schools. We really do not need to know who they are to treat everyone with respect and acceptance. There are also many straight students who have family members or friends who are gay, and they need validating, too. The best way to help a gay student is the best way to help any student: by accepting all people and their differences. Once a teacher has established himself or herself as a nonjudgmental individual, accepting of all, the classroom will reflect that. It will be a safe zone and students will feel free to be themselves.

Having said that, many if not most school systems do not have a structure set up to work with gay students. Many counselors are not sure how to react to rumors that one of their students is gay or how to help a student who "comes out" to them. Administrators often do not have the support, or offer the support, required to nurture the acceptance needed to reach out to these students. Too often administrators run from the issue. One loud, complaining parent can stir up a great deal of contention.

Sadly, a major obstacle to providing the needed support for gay

teens comes from the pressure created by the antigay religious groups throughout our country. Plus there is an overwhelming ignorance out there about gays and lesbians, not to mention bisexuals and transsexuals. As a result, a growing number of supportive GSAs in schools have kept the American Civil Liberties Union very busy fighting for their right to exist in many parts of the country.

**Don Gallo:** *Why are so many gay teens harassed in schools and on the streets every day?*

**C. J. Bott:** Gay teens, or perceived-to-be-gay teens, are harassed because the harassers feel their way is the only way. Heterosexism is the practiced belief that everyone is straight, or ought to be, thereby devaluing anyone who is not. I am not much of a history buff, but it seems to me that all through time there have been groups treated unfairly, given “less-than” status for illogical, emotional reasons. Harassment of gays is the present-day witch hunt. We may say all humans are created equal, but we do not treat everyone equally.

**Don Gallo:** *How can books help?*

**C. J. Bott:** It is really pretty simple and an established way of thinking. As Americans, we tend to believe in education. When the Iraq war broke out, bookstores reported that books about Islam were flying off the shelves. There is a need to learn about what we do not understand. Taking a lesson from that, we need books to educate uninformed people and to validate the experiences of gay people in our society. We need books that will dispel some of the loneliness and isolation that result from lack of acceptance. We need stories about gay people to destroy the stereotypical images that reinforce the harassment. We need

to find the truth, to support those who are gay, and to influence the thinking of those who are acting out of ignorance and fear.

**Don Gallo:** *OK, say I'm a tenured English teacher who knows nothing about gays except what I get from occasionally watching Will and Grace on TV and hearing friends talk about Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. I think my hairdresser is gay, but that's his business, and he's not a student in any of my classes. Give me a couple of book titles that might help me be more understanding—please.*

**C. J. Bott:** There are a number of books to suggest. Some have characters who are questioning their sexual identity, and in others the characters are living openly as gays. *The Geography Club* by Brent Hartinger [New York: Harper, 2003], for example, tells the story of a gay teen who meets another gay teen on the Internet, and they discover they go to the same high school. The two young men and a few other gay teens form the Ge-

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ography Club, feeling sure no one else will join such a club and they will have a safe place in which to feel free to be themselves. The reader has a chance to see what these young people go through in school and in general. Their insecurities show that these students are not very different from other teens, which is why this book would benefit all readers.

*Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez [New York: Simon, 2003] features three male characters who are at different stages of personal awareness. Nelson is gay and proud, and his mother has joined PFLAG



[Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays]. Kyle has come to a personal acceptance but is not ready for anyone else to know. Jason is a school athlete, a jock, who dates girls, but while he is kissing his girlfriend, he keeps thinking about sex with guys. Their parents also cover the spectrum of responses to gays, from those trying to be accepting to a father who leaves the family.

*Empress of the World* by Sara Ryan [New York: Viking, 2001] takes place at a summer camp for the gifted and talented. Nicola has never had any lesbian relationships but finds herself very attracted to Battle, a beautiful blonde dancer and nonconformist. Their relationship develops in this safe environment but, as in all relationships, there are problems. Battle wants freedom while Nicola clings to her first romance. We have all experienced a first romance and can relate to Nicola's pain even though her romance is with another female.

Ro, the main character in *Out of the Shadows* by Sue Hines [New York: Avon, 1998], is not lesbian, but her mother was, and Jodie, the new student at school, is also. Several levels of homophobia educate the reader in this young adult novel from Australia. Many of our students who have gay family members will relate to Ro's struggle.

For nonfiction, two of my favorites are *The Shared Heart*, photographed by Adam Mastoon [New York: Harper, 2001], and *How to Make the World a Better Place for Gays and Lesbians* by Una Fahy [New York: Warner, 1995]. *The Shared Heart* is a collection of photographic portraits of gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens with each individual's story on the adjoining page. Be sure to look at the hardback edition; the larger photographs make a better presentation than the smaller paperback. *The Shared Heart* should be in every library. Students may not check it out, but they will pick it up, slowly turn the pages, and leave it in many different places around the library. This collection lets gay kids know they are not alone. *How to Make the World a Better Place* talks a lot about homophobia. This book helped me realize that even though I thought I was knowledgeable, I was still homophobic on some levels.

You could also check the GLSEN [Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network] Web site—<http://www.glsen.org>—which has an abundance of materials.

**Don Gallo:** *You've recommended those books for my edification, thank you. Are they appropriate for my students as well?*

**C. J. Bott:** I would recommend different books for different students. For high school students who are struggling with the possibility they might be gay, I would suggest *Empress of the World* and *Out of the Shadows* for females and *The Geography Club* and *Rainbow Boys* for males. I would suggest *The Shared Heart* for both. Any of these would benefit other students who, like you, want to learn more and who enjoy good books.

For a concerned middle school student I would suggest James

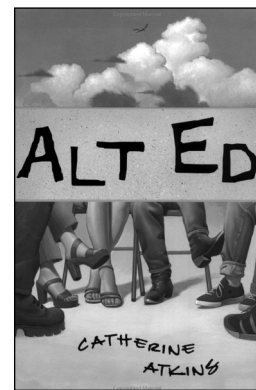
Howe's *The Misfits* [New York: Atheneum, 2001]. If I could, I would have every middle school student in the country read that book because it takes on the most common form of bullying—name-calling. Homosexuality is not discussed, but one seventh grader is constantly faced with homophobic slurs. His friends are all subjected to slurs that fit their alienation. This book does an excellent job of talking about the need for respectful treatment of others and the prevalence of name-calling in schools.

*Simon Says* by Elaine Marie Alphin [San Diego: Harcourt, 2002] is another great read for high school students because it talks about the struggle to find one's true self, to stop playing the games of expectations that dominate in our society. The main character's roommate is gay, but his gayness is not the point of the book. His sexual orientation is simply a statement of fact, handled in a subtle, almost casual way. In fact, the gay student, Adrian, is the healthiest, most mature character in the book. We all need more books like this.

For the high school bully who thinks he or she isn't really doing any harm, I would recommend *What Happened to Lani Garver* by Carol Plum-Ucci [San Diego: Harcourt, 2002], *Alt Ed* by Catherine Atkins [New York: Putnam, 2003], and *Jerome* by William Tay-

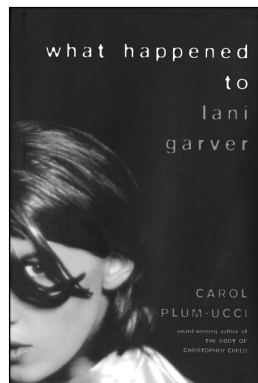
lor [Los Angeles: Alyson, 1999]. In *What Happened to Lani Garver*, the reader knows at the beginning that Lani has been killed by homophobic hometown boys. Lani is one of those people who inspire the question, "Is that a boy or a girl?" Because of that perception, he is killed. Even at the end of the book, the open-minded reader will realize all the evidence is created by the hometown boys; no facts support their conclusion.

*Alt Ed* is about six kids in an after-school program that is an al-



ternative to suspension. Two of the students are Brendan, a gay male, and Kale, his main tormentor. But all the prejudices seen in the other kids and their horror at what Brendan has to experience in school are the real lessons in the book. This novel reminds me of that film, *The Breakfast Club*, where kids from the different groups at school are kept together in detention because they have misbehaved.

*Jerome* opens with Marco, in Australia, calling Katie, on an exchange in the United States, because their best friend Jerome has been killed in a hunting accident. As the book unfolds, readers learn that Katie, a closet lesbian, had been Jerome's fake girlfriend, as he was also gay. Marco, close to being a gay basher, must face the fact that his friend committed suicide and how he contributed to Jerome's final act.



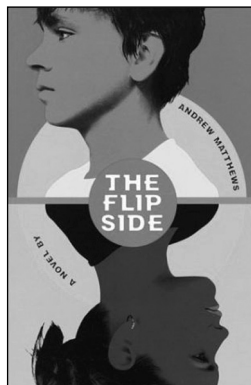
When a straight student reads this book, he or she can see the lengths to which some gay students go to protect their identity and how powerful hateful words can be in forcing gay students to hide out.

For students who are open-minded and just want a good read, I would suggest *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan [New York:

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Knopf, 2003] and *The Flip Side* by Andrew Matthews [New York: Delacorte, 2003]. *Boy Meets Boy* takes place in a society free of sexual prejudices. Paul was “outed” by his kindergarten teacher, but once he understands the term *gay* he is pleased with it. “Vote for me . . . I’m gay” gets him elected as president of his third-grade class. He and his classmates grow up accepting that all different people exist. Reading this book is a bit like reading about a fantasy high school, one with true acceptance for all.

In *The Flip Side*, Robert Hunt has a part in a Shakespeare com-



edy, playing a girl, and must wear a dress, which he realizes he likes. Then Milena, the gorgeous girl Rob is crazy about, finds his cross-

ressing a real turn-on. This book makes everyone think, even the characters.

**Don Gallo:** *That last one sounds like a lot of fun. Now I'm wondering how to introduce these books to students. What if we don't do—and aren't free to do—a unit on homophobia or on gay teens in my school? Is there another way for me to get these books into the hands of my students?*

**C. J. Bott:** Educating yourself is the first and most important thing you can do. You have to read the books to open your thinking and so that you know which book is right for each student. The more you read and increase your understanding, the more you will see opportunities to use what you have learned, opportunities that were missed before. Carry the books around school, letting others see you are reading

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them. Let them wander into your discussion: “Hey, I am reading this great book!” That alone will help advertise these books. If you don’t want to be seen reading *Boy Meets Boy*, you might not be as open-minded as you think.

Also, tell the school librarian about these books. Show her or him this column. Many librarians are hesitant to order books with gay characters, but librarians really do have more freedom than the classroom teacher does. Also, when you visit your public library, ask what books they have with gay characters.

One way to get these books into the curriculum is to tie them into themed units you already teach. For example, I am currently work-

ing with a middle school on a bully unit. The generic term *bullying* covers all forms of harassment. Using literature circles, the students read six different books, all with bullying in them. *The Misfits* is one of those books. Homosexuality is not the main theme in the book, or in the unit, but a character is harassed because of his effeminate ways, and that is discussed as part of the unit’s main theme of bullying.

Another way is to include some of these titles any time you give book talks.

Nancie Atwell’s Reading Workshop concept presents a great opportunity for students to choose books they want to read. My sophomores had to read 350 pages of outside reading each quarter. They made their own selections—some chosen from my book talks—with the understanding that I would check with their parents on any titles I felt were inappropriate. While the students read their books, I read mine; they often wanted to know what I was reading and if they could read it next.

It is important for everyone to read these books, not just because they include gay characters but because they are about people going through the process of life. Some of the characters happen to be gay, but we all feel lost, lonely, confused, amazed, accepted, challenged, and many more things in our lives. These are great books, well written, that deal with issues that touch all of us. Books with gay characters are one more category to add to multicultural books. They are about people, all kinds of people.

**Don Gallo:** *Well said. Thank you. Before we end, can you recommend just a handful of other books our students might find valuable?*

**C. J. Bott:** Here is exactly a handful.

*Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence* edited by Marion Dane Bauer [New York: Harper, 1994]. Short stories about being gay, with a hilarious opening story by Bruce Coville.

*From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* by Jacqueline Woodson [New York: Scholastic, 1995]. An African American boy describes his reactions when his mother falls in love with another woman, who is white.

*Hard Love* by Ellen Wittlinger [New York: Simon, 1999]. When John and Marisol share a love of zines, John falls in love with Marisol, who is a lesbian.

*My Heartbeat* by Garret Freymann-Weyr [Boston: Houghton, 2002]. Ellen has a crush on James, who is the best friend of her brother, Link, but Link and James may have their own relationship.

And a must-have for teachers: *When the Drama Club Is Not Enough:*

*Lessons from the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students* by Jeff Perrotti and Kim Westheimer [Boston: Beacon, 2002]. This non-fiction book speaks directly to educators who want to change the school climate.

**Don Gallo:** *Thanks, C. J. You've given us a lot to think about.*

Having retired after thirty years of teaching high school English, **C. J. Bott** continues to be active in the profession by serving as a member of the Board of Directors of NCTE's Assembly on Literature for Adolescents and as a consultant to schools regarding bullying and harassment and young adult literature. She is also the author of the recently published *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2004). For her work with the Shaker Heights High School Gay/Straight Alliance as well as her development of antiharassment policies in local schools, she received the 2003 Intellectual Freedom Award from NCTE/SLATE and OCTELA (Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts). (Full disclosure: C. J. is also my wife.)