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Guide to Selection of Queer Adolescent Literature for Language Arts Teachers and Librarians

Part of the journal section “Essays, Studies, and Works”

Dwight C. Watson, Terri Lasswell, Stephanie Logan, and Yolanda Hood, "Guide to Selection of Queer Adolescent Literature for Language Arts Teachers and Librarians”

This article was written based on the belief that if teachers and librarians were aware of criteria that would allow them to select appropriate literature for adolescents that are inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and questioning characters, themes, and plots, then these educators would be bold and resolute in including such literature in their classrooms and libraries. There have been copious articles that discuss the merit of such literature in the classroom and libraries. We will revisit some of those justifications, but our main emphasis of this article is to determine a set of criteria that librarians, teachers, parents, and others could use to select adolescent queer literature.

The term *queer* is specifically used to make an empowering statement about the emancipatory strength of a word that was once used as hate speech and as a collective noun to capture the multiplicity of sexualities and gender expressions that are usually captured as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning/queer) as well as an adjective that describes the collective such as in adolescent *queer* literature. Blackburn and Buckley (2005) explain that the word *queer* recognizes “sexual and gender identities as social, multiple, variable, shifting, fluid, and allow for movement among such identity categories (p. 202).

The authors explored queer literature, queer literature review, and multicultural literature review and criteria checklists for multicultural literature to determine from the texts an emerging set of criteria that could be used to select quality adolescent queer literature for libraries, classrooms, teacher preparation courses, and personal reading. We were compelled to conduct this review because we found there was a plethora of material focused on the selection of multicultural literature which tangentially provided glimpses of support for queer literature through a social justice lens, but limited criteria for specifying how to best select queer literature for adolescents. We believed that a defined set of criteria was needed in order to make decision about quality queer literature because since 1996 over 200 novels have been published centered around gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and questioning characters as they meandered through their conflicts, compromises, consequences, and conquests (Wickens, 2011). As teachers and librarians, we could attest to how literature has been used in our classrooms as the conduit to conversation and connectivity.

Once the criteria emerged, we field tested the criteria by reading contemporary, adolescent queer literature to determine if our criteria had merit. We were aware that as Cart and Jenkins (2004) discovered that queer characters in literature evolved historically through a three-part framework – homosexual visibility, gay assimilation, and queer consciousness/community. The books that we chose to read and to align the criteria were those that we viewed emblematic of queer consciousness and community. Embedded in these books were coming of age themes of love, loss, alienation, independence, friendships, and being true to one’s self (Letellier, 2005). We sought books that focused on these themes because we thought this literature a shift toward more progressive inclusion and “did not depict homosexuality as a passing phase; as incurring retribution through ostracism, violence, and even death; and as a life that dooms characters to dreary, isolated lives” (Wickens, 2011, p. 149).

During our review, we encountered many configurations of queerness which included books that we characterized as queer/questioning because the main and secondary characters represented a plethora of sexualities and gender expressions. Banks (2009) calls this blending *lesbigay* which combines lesbian, gay, and bisexual. The queer literature that we focused pertained to a main or secondary character that was a teenager who identified as queer or questioning, has queer tendencies, or discovers that he or she is queer. Clyde and Lobban (2001) emphasized the other queer literature we explored which was *coming out* novels in which the secondary character or supporting character is reporting the effects of the process on others. Banks (2009) noted that the bulk of adolescent queer literature is coming out narratives, but we as teachers, counselors, and librarians should delve into contemporary texts and move beyond the narrative in order to engage readers in thinking emphatically and critically. Although there are many books for adolescents that have queer characters that are peripheral or adolescents who may have queer parents, we did not focus on these books when solidifying the criteria.

Criteria and Rationales

As we reviewed the literature and read various adolescent queer literature texts, we were intentional as we sought criteria that would enable others to select literature that would increase the awareness and sensitivity of pluralism, celebrate diverse cultures and common bonds, and create a comprehensive, timely, and authoritative forum for reviewing materials on and related to queer adolescents (Shields, 1994; Vare & Norton, 2004). The criteria emerged as we read various articles pertaining to the availability and use of adolescent queer literature, queer theory, and queer curriculum integration. We established a set of criteria that teachers and librarians could use to select literature for use in the classroom and add to the collections in school and public libraries. Listed below are nine criteria that are defined based on distinctive characteristics found in the literature reviewed, rationalized according the criteria appropriateness for adolescents and representation of queer adolescents, and researched as documented by the scholars that provide evidence to support our assertions.

Curriculum Relevance – The criterion curriculum relevance focus on whether the literature can be relevant to be taught in the classroom or suggested as assigned reading that aligns with lessons taught. To select relevant literature, teachers must raise the consciousness of their own presuppositions. What is the theoretical position? In what way would an adolescent read this text? Do we allow the readers to question what they read? Teachers are obligated to select literature that challenge presupposed assumptions and enable students to think critically. Teacher must be aware that students are not obligated to go along with the constructions in literature. They can actively resist what they encounter during their transactions with texts (McGillis, 1996, p.21). This type of connectivity to the text is what Banks (2009) describes as critical literacy which enables readers to challenge and be challenged, to grapple with their understanding of secrets, and to examine and practice coping with change. Alexander (2008) further explained that if we are invested in working with students to develop critical understanding of their places and their possibilities in the world, then we must consider issues of sexuality as central to the development of contemporary literacy. Black and Buckley (2005) challenge teachers to provide instruction that is queer-inclusive when it pertains to English language arts curriculum. They conjecture that the teaching of “queer theory works against the oppression that comes with being named, labeled, and tagged” (p. 202). Lipkin (1994) further supports this notion that sexual orientation and sexual identity should be an integrated, serious, and sustained component of the academic discourse within the disciplines of middle and high schools. Teachers could use these scholars as support when having to provide rationale for their literature selection.

Window and Mirrors – Teachers and librarians should select literature that provide readers window and mirror opportunities. A window opportunity is when the readers are exposed to aspects of the literature that offer new insights and perspectives to their existing notions. A mirror opportunity occurs when readers get to relate to what is read through reflective interactions with the characters. The mirror opportunities are enhanced if the literature conveys positive self-images of characters that have affinity with the readers. Learning to consider the experiences and perspectives of those who are marginalized is difficult from members of a dominant group who have not encountered similar obstacles (Murray, 2010, p. 48). We all interpret behaviors and information through our own cultural lenses; these lenses operate involuntarily below the level of conscious awareness making it seem that our own view is simply the way it is. Mirror opportunities takes place when the literature focuses on geographical locations, cultural traditions, developmental stages, sexual orientation, and gender expression that are akin to those of the adolescent readers. The emphasis for using queer literature is its ability to encourage empathy in readers as they reflect on their own feelings, struggles, and experiences through which they have been marginalize (Meixner, 2006, p. 76).

Literary Merit – Literature with literary merit unsettles the reader and makes the reader asks questions about what was thought as certain. This literature does not just affirm everything we know (Shields, 1994). Select queer literature that enhances language and cognitive development in the language arts by providing a variety of vocabulary structures, and forms as they engage adolescent readers in processes such as comparing, hypothesizing, organizing, summarizing, and

critically evaluating is considered literature of literary merit. Adolescent queer literature “should be high quality, meeting literary standards for character development, plausibility of plot, and authenticity of setting, and importance of theme” (Vare & Norton, 2004, p. 190).

Social Justice and Equity – This literature engage readers in thinking about equity and how this influences their social identity. The literature must be vital in assisting teachers and librarians in the promotion of social justice values. The literature examines the power imbalances resulting from historical oppression of queer people. Themes emanating from social justice literature will acknowledge this oppressive structure so that readers can thoughtfully engage in conversations pertaining to power, privilege, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. In the literature, there should be opportunities in which basic human rights are embraced and not denied. There is mainstream acceptance of non-normative sexual identities as well as established rituals to promote homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender and affirming values that assert a change in the social structure of the dominant culture (Crisp, p. 335).

Stereotypes – Teachers and librarians should choose literature that discourages false images of queer persons and influence healthy perceptions about sexual orientation and gender expression. Stereotypes oversimplify a generalization about a particular group and they often carry derogatory implications (Temple, Yokota, & Martinez, 2010). Non-stereotypical literature enables readers to examine their own attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and confront the overt and subdued prejudice that accompanies institutionalized homophobia (Murray, 2010, p 49). Authenticity is depicted through representative examples of the spectrum of the queer community and not just stereotypes. Clark and Blackburn (2009) stated that adolescent queer literature should be steeped in queer consciousness that portray multiple queer characters within supportive communities and families, including families of their own making. “They show the diversity of LGBTQ characters and dispel the myth that being gay means being alone” (p. 29). Teachers and librarians can use this type of literature to challenge assumptions and to broaden perspectives.

Pride, Resiliency, and Self-Actualization – Queer adolescent literature should reflect the achievements, pride, self-awareness, and resiliency of queer characters. These books should champion resiliency as the ability to maximize assets, function effectively, and grow in the face of adversity and challenge. Gordon (2005) describes this as the *literature of hope* as characters encounter barriers, struggles, and crisis they gain resiliency and exit with a sense of self-confidence. This self-confidence leads to actualization which is awareness followed by emancipation and empowerment. In this literature, there is a focus on the challenges and possibilities of the characters and not dwelling on despair. Pavao (2003) believed that queer literature should come out of the closet and into the classroom in order to open up the eyes, minds, and hearts of adolescent readers who are primed for life-based insights to assist in their identity development. Malinowitz (1995) stated that teachers, counselors, and librarians must use queer literature to rescue readers from the damaging and sometimes deadly effects of homophobia and heterosexism.

Sexual Expressiveness – Adolescent literature that focuses on sexual expressiveness is viewed as relevant, current, and authentic. Teachers and librarians need to select queer literature in which a feeling of liberation in which individuals are free to be whom they are with their gender and sexuality expressions are expressed. Sexuality and gender expression is a de facto part of the human experience. Characters are depicted in sexual and intimate relationships that are parallel in explicitness and expressiveness of those of typical adolescent literature. Sexual expressions of hugging, touching, kissing, and making out are captured as natural, age-appropriate interactions and not exoticized or eroticized. Teachers and librarians should choose books that will enable adolescents to discuss the fluidity of sexuality, teens are rejecting traditional labels for sexual orientation, such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, and now invent their own terms like multi-sexual, hetero-flexible, poly-gendered, and omni-sexual” (Martin, 2006, p. 38). When selecting queer adolescent literature for instructional purposes, teachers often want to select books that are devoid of sexual encounters. The filter question that teachers should use is whether the same encounters would be considered acceptable if heterosexual characters engaged in them (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005). Gay and lesbian adolescents may become more isolated as opposed to connected due to having no models of gay intimacy and society’s inability to accept gay intimacy. This intimacy invisibility for gay and lesbian youth leads to arrested development; therefore, they typically experience their first non-sexual intimate encounters (kissing, hugging, touching, etc.) during their young adulthood as opposed to their adolescent years (Watson, 2010). Selecting literature that have appropriate same-sex sexual and intimacy expressions can assist queer adolescents in offsetting this arrested development.

Inclusion and Diversity – Inclusion literature usually reflects a world of ordinary people getting along regardless of their diversity. For queer literature, the inclusion and diversity relates to all types of sexual orientation and gender expressions and their intersection with age, religion, race, ethnicity, national origin, ancestry, disability, and socio-economic background. Characters will have their distinct gender and sexual orientations as well as their intersections with other aspects of diversity. Although the literature may concentrate on a specific character’s diversity, the fluidity of this character’s interactions with others is representational of the character’s inclusiveness. Queer adolescent literature provides a wealth of intersections as they provide a heightened awareness and increased contemplation of history and cultural stereotypes. These books also focus on the life changes of members of disenfranchised groups and the challenges faced by members of diverse communities attempting to maintain their cultural and sexual identities (Chevalier & Houser, 1997). Queer literature that is inclusive must provoke empathy, understanding and a sense of commonality across difference. The literature should not lead to sympathetic responsiveness in which straight students feel sorry for gay people and leaves queer students in the classroom positioned as pitiable (Clark & Blackburn, 2009).

Offsetting Heterosexism and Homophobia/ Challenging Heteronormativity – Teachers and librarians should select literature that identifies assumptions about heterosexuality which often regulate the social norms and language of a school with regard to topics of family, love, attraction, and sexual and emotional relationships. This literature should also identify how

ignoring homosexual culture, many learning institutions remain tolerant of verbal harassment (pejorative jokes and epithets) and physical abuse (pushing and kicking) directed at students who are perceived to be queer. These hetero-sexist and homophobic renderings should be disrupted and adolescent queer literature is the medium in which this deconstruction can take place. The literature can be used as the onset for defining homophobia as a socially produced form of discrimination against homosexuals and heterosexism as bias, attitudes, and discrimination toward opposite sex sexuality and relations. Heteronormativity is defined as the understanding of straight and gender-normative people as normal and others as not (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). Queer theory and queer analyses of adolescent queer literature work to expand and problematize notions of what is acceptable and normal. Such queer approaches challenge the signifiers and the structures that indicate otherness and difference and work to make them normal and usual (Sumara & Davis, 1999; Rabinowitz, 2004).

Another component of heteronormativity is *hegemonic masculinity* and *femininity* which embodies the current most honored way of being a man or a woman. Hegemonic masculinity has been found particularly in youth and adolescent males who do not participate in sports or do not currently have a girlfriend. These males are often made to feel less masculine and not compliant with masculine notions of being. Plummer (2001) discovered that “during primary school, boyhood homophobia reaches various crescendos and peaks, usually during early- to mid-secondary school.” (p. 22). Queer literature should elucidate this phenomenon and provide acceptance scenarios to counter hegemony. According to Crisp (2009), it is a failure of language within a hetero-normative system that leads to the failures of gay adolescent literature. Any book that seeks to educate individuals about homophobia and intolerance by presenting a world, in which homophobia and intolerance are the norm on some level, ultimately reinforces the inevitabilities; therefore, it best to take an instructional stance in which the teacher assumes that all learners in the classroom are open and affirming to all people (Griffin & Harro, (2007). The same way to be true of novelizations of gay adolescent lives: on the surface, these accounts are in some ways “affirmative” and give voice and representation to gay males, but because they so heavily rely on hetero-normative construction of romance, sex, sexuality, and the world more broadly, they often actually work to continue the invisibility of the gay males by filtering queer existence and distancing readers (i.e., queer characters are safely viewed through the layers of heterosexuality. (Yeh, 1992, p. 157)

Adolescent Queer Literature and Annotations

As we read the reviews and articles while creating the criteria, we identified several adolescent literature texts that were written about gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and questioning youth either as main characters or secondary characters. We encourage teachers and librarians to read some of the suggested literature and align the literature with the criteria listed to determine those selections that are best suited for the classroom and the library collection. In addition to the list, we have provided some annotative examples of how the criteria can be applied.

Gay literature – This literature depicts gay characters and their allies.

Alt Ed – Catherine Atkins
Absolutely, Positively Not – David LaRochelle
Another Kind of Cowboy – Susan Juby
Bait – Alex Sanchez
Dream Boy – Jim Grimsley
Getting It – Alex Sanchez
God Box – Alex Sanchez
Hero - P. Moore
Jerome – William Taylor
Order of the Poison Oak – Brent Hartinger
Rainbow Boys – Alex Sanchez
Rainbow High – Alex Sanchez
Rainbow Road – Alex Sanchez
Simon Says – Elaine Marie Alphin
Someday this Pain Will be Useful to You – Peter Cameron
Someone’s Watching – Mark Roeder
Stitches – Glen Huser
Surfer Dogs – Frank Willmott
The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers - J. Babcock
The Truth About Alex – Anne Snyder and Louis Pelletier
The Vast Fields of Ordinary – Nick Burd
Totally Joe – James Howe
“White Balloons” – J. O. Cofer (short story)
Who Lies Inside – Timothy Ireland

Lesbian – This literature depicts primarily lesbian characters and their allies.

Ask the Passenger - A. S. King
Dare, Truth, and Promises – Paula Boock
Deliver Us from Evie – M. E. Kerr
Empress of the World – Sara Ryan
Far From Xanadu – Julie Ann Peters
Finding H. F. – Julia Watts
Gravel Queen – Tea Benduhn
Gravity – Leanne Liberman
Kissing Kate – Lauren Myracle
Love Rules – Marilyn Reynolds
“Name Me Nobody” – Lois-Ann Yamanaka (short story)
Night Driving – Michelene Esposito
Out of the Shadows – Sue Hines
What Happened to Lani Garver – Carol Plum-Ucci

Bisexual – This literature includes bisexual characters as central to the plot of the story.

A Really Nice Prom Mess – Brian Sloan

My Heartbeat – Garret Freymann-Weyr

Saints of Augustine – P. E. Ryan

The Full Spectrum – David Levithan and Billy Merrell

Transgendered – This literature focuses on the lives of transgendered individuals and their allies.

Almost Perfect – Brian Katcher

Autobiography of a Family Photo – Jacqueline Woodson

Debbie Harry Sings in French – Meagan Brothers

Freak Show – James St. James

I Am J - Cris Beam

Luna – Julie Anne Peters

Pretty Things – Sarra Manning

The Boy in a Dress – David Walliams

Questioning/Queer – This literature has a combination of *lesbigay* characters (mixture of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals as main and secondary characters).

Almost Perfect - Brian Katcher

Boy Meets World – D. Levithan

Down to the Bone – Mayra Lazara Dole

Erik and Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High - K. Wallace

Erik and Isabelle: Sophomore Year at Foresthill High - K. Wallace

Geography Club – Brent Hartinger

Hard Love – Ellen Wittlinger

Not the Only One: Lesbian and Gay Fiction for Teens – Jane Summer

So Hard to Say – Alex Sanchez

The Flip Side – Andrew Matthews

The Misfits – James Howe

The Secret Fruit of Peter Paddington – Brian Francis

The Shared Heart – Adam Mastoon

Annotated Entries

Gay

Absolute Brightness by James Lecesne - The cover of the book captures the wispy portrait of a teenage boy whose bright-eyes are full of wonder and at the same time a sense of lost. The caption under the picture says, “Once Leonard Pelkey disappeared, he was everywhere.” This brief statement of anticipation captures the experiences of small town, USA where a Leonard

Pelkey type-of-boy is an anomaly. Leonard was thrust on the town as his adopted father drops him off at his sister's home. The story is told through the lens of Phoebe who is Leonard's forced upon, adopted cousin. Phoebe and her sister, Deidre, are not happy when their mother announced that Leonard was to stay with them. They nestled Leonard in the basement between piles of boxes that holds the life remnants of their deceased grandmother. Although Leonard is relegated to the basement in a cubby between cardboard boxes, his spirit and person cannot be contained. He takes on the tasks of giving everyone in the town some sort of extreme makeover physically or dispositionally. Physical transformations take place in his aunt's beauty parlor where Leonard works and provides suggestions on how the women can better themselves. Each person becomes a contestant on Leonard's own Project Runway. Unfortunately, Leonard disappears and is later discovered drowned in a nearby lake. The homicide is investigated and the murder is discovered. The trial begins and Phoebe must testify against a local boy with whom she has had relations. Her testimony provides insight into the fact that Travis, the accused, is more than simply evil, but misguided. She must also figure out how to defend him from being put to death as opposed to life in prison. Leonard's death illuminates the lives of each person in the small town as the funeral attendees recognize that they share a piece of Leonard's absolute brightness.

The book is relevant to curriculum that discusses the democratic process of arrests, accusations, investigations, trials, and sentencing. Educators will find that the book houses many examples of literary merit as the author is masterful at storytelling through the use of suspense, figurative language, voice, character development, and visual imagery. The book also discusses acts of social justice and equity as Leonard unabashedly lives his life as fiercely as he wants to regardless of the consequences. Instead of him acclimating to his new surroundings, he makes his environment adapt to him as the town folk change their attitudes about a young man who is colorful and lavishly adorned in his own haute couture. Leonard represents the stereotypical gay young man in his appearance and behavior, but besides discovering some condoms and muscle magazine in his cardboard cubby room after his death, there is no mentioning of his gayness or any sexual expressiveness. The author simply describes the character and the readers make their own hegemonic assumptions. The book focuses on diversity and inclusion because the town represents different ethnicities, but the small town values are expressed by all and no one group seems to be marginalized.

Stitches by Glen Huser (2003) is a coming-of-age novel that captures the middle school years of the main character Travis and his best friend Chantelle. Travis asks his mom, Gentry, a traveling honky tonk singer, "How come I'm different? What made me different?" Instead of sports and other boy-based rough-housing, he prefers sewing and creating puppet shows. Chantelle is physically fragile due to birth defects that has left her brittle-boned in leg braces, but is strong with conviction and support for Travis. She befriended Travis when the school bully, Shon Docker, and his cronies Todd Wingate and Cameron Coaldale pulled down Travis's pants and revealed that he was wearing pink underwear -- not by choice, but due to a red sweater washing machine accident. Chantelle asked Travis why did he made so easy for him as he handed him a three pack of boys briefs and took him to the Goodwill to purchase some jumpsuits that were

impossible to be removed before the teachers could intervene. This act of solidarity in elementary school made them steadfast friends through middle school. The bullying intensifies as the years progress and what was once simply name-calling intensified to physical abuse. The saving grace from the constant terrorizing was the puppet production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Travis shines as he writes the script, creates the puppets, and directs the play with the help of his forward-thinking fashion design teacher, Ms. Riccio. During the production of the play both Travis and Chantelle realize that they too were changeling children who did not fit the confines of their present realities.

This book epitomizes the criterion of remaining resilient regardless of obstacles as Travis finds his niche as a self-identified *stitch master*. He learned with the help of supportive teachers, a beloved friend, and a dysfunctional family to maximize his assets in the wake of adversity. This book also provides rich discussion opportunities related to bullying and harassment and the need for bystander intervention because sometimes the victims are too compromised to defend for themselves. Travis never identifies as gay. In fact the word is never mentioned throughout the book, even though Travis' tormentors rain gay epithets upon him such as *faggot*, *fairy*, and *queer*. Another criterion that is emphasized in this book is the hegemony of heterosexuality. Since Travis is a young man who does not possess mannerisms and interests that are deemed boyish or masculine, than by default he is presumed gay. One of the many endearing aspects of this book is the inclusion of socio-economic diversity. Travis and Chantelle are poor compared to others at the school. They do not begrudge their socio-economic status, but instead show that the familial support that they have is the strength behind their tenacity. This book should be placed in middle school libraries and librarians should introduce it during book talks so students could benefit from the reading as a windows opportunity. Due to the title, students will not be able to discover this book without some encouragement from a supportive librarian or teacher.

The God Box by Alex Sanchez focuses on the teenage lives of Manuel and Paul. Manuel is an out gay student who comes to a small Christian town in Texas and asks casually at the lunch table if the school has a gay straight alliance (GSA). When he announces that he is gay, it sends tremors of unrest through the school and the community. Paul is most unnerved by this because these pronouncements tap into his own laden questioning identity. To complicate matters even more so both are professed Christians whose biblical interpretations differ. Paul keeps God in a box as one who does not accept homosexuality. He prays that he is cured and that his thoughts about boys would disappear. Manuel on the other hand believes in a benevolent God who created all types of creatures -- God doesn't make mistakes. As the two explore the intersections of spirituality and sexuality, they become more accepting of themselves and others.

This novel aligns with the criterion of inclusion and diversity because it focuses on the varied assumptions and diverse perspectives pertaining to spirituality as well as the inclusion of queer-identified individuals in the conversations and actions of the church. The book also challenges heteronormative assumptions about the acceptance of gay people by religious people. The story truly emphasizes how the Bible can be interpreted as a means of excluding queer people from the

church as well as welcoming them into open and affirming communities. Religious stereotypes are dispelled which enable the main characters to exhibit pride, resiliency, and self-actualization about who they are and how they shape their local context through their identities, ideas, and actions.

Hero by Perry Moore - Thom is just an average teen who wants to play basketball and live down the past of his father who is a discredited super hero. Thom's life becomes complicated as he finds out that he has the power to heal physical and mental sickness with the touch of his hands. His powers are discovered as he is caught in a battle between good and evil while on a bus trip running away from home. He is leaving home because he realizes that he is gay and his very proud although discredited father would not be accepting of his sexuality. On the bus escape, the journey is interrupted when three villains attack the bus as they escape from the mysterious hero simply called Dark Hero. As the villains destroy the bus and put the passengers at harm, Thom is thrust into healing the wounded. The villainous attack is thwarted when the League of Super Heroes arrive on the scene. Thom's powers are noted by Justice, leader of the League, and Thom is invited to try out as a Junior League hero. The story unfolds as Thom begins to harness his powers and to accept his sexuality, but his trials to self-actualization includes confronting his father and mother's past, falling in love with his basketball nemesis, and being instrumental in saving the world.

One criterion revealed in this book is that of pride, resilience, and self-actualization. Thom overcomes many barriers pertaining to his superhero powers and sexuality to become a person who accepting of who he is regardless of the consequences. Through his example, he changes others' perceptions of gayness. The book also depicts aspects of social justice, inclusivity, and diversity. The super heroes are all from diverse backgrounds including race, sexuality, and socio-economic status. The blending of this diversity in which strengths are amplified and aligned for the common good showcases the value of all types of people. The main purpose of the League is to save humanity and to focus on truth and justice for all.

Someone is Watching by Mark A. Roeder - This book tells the coming out story of Ethan, an Indiana farm teenager. Ethan lives on the farm with his Uncle Jack since his parents were killed in an accident. Ethan enjoys the outdoors, working on the farm, hanging with his friends, and above all wrestling. The book begins with a wrestling match that qualifies Ethan for the varsity team. He is excited, but is concerned about how his uncle will react to wrestling interfering with his farm chores. He shares with his uncle who is accepting as long as Ethan takes care of his priorities on the farm. To assist Ethan, Uncle Jack hired Nathan. Nathan is a poor kid who has family responsibilities of earning money, taking care of Dave, his little brother, and trying to get money for food and clothing. Juggling wrestling and farm work is of little consequence when Ethan finds out that someone is leaving him notes claiming they know he is gay because of the way he has been looking at his friend Jon in the locker room. The notes become increasingly threatening as nude pictures of Jon are placed in Ethan's locker depicting a recent trip in which

Jon and Ethan went horse backing riding and ended the ride with skinny dipping in the pond. Ethan is horrified because someone is definitely watching his every move. He also realizes these pictures are appealing to him and forces him to personally confront his gayness. To offset these feelings, he starts dating and making out with Kim. He eventually has sex with her and realizes that he could only participate by visualizing Jon. He accepts his gayness and feelings for Jon.

In the meantime, two other friends are found out to be gay. Mark and Taylor are discovered making out by Mark's father. Mark's father reports his finding to the boys' soccer coach who in turn denounces them to the entire team. There is vicious backlash against Mark and Taylor. Mark is accosted and violently battered. He is placed in critical condition in the hospital. Taylor visits him every day until Taylor's father finds out and throws Taylor out of the house. Taylor is distraught due to the abandonment, gay bashing of his boyfriend, and constant harassment. He decides to commit suicide. Mark distraught over the death of his boyfriend takes his own life. The two families realized too late the pain they caused and bury the two boys next to each other. Ethan realizes that if he would have come out as well he could have helped Mark and Taylor. He eventually tells Jon and Nathan about his gayness and they are both accepting. Jon accepts his gayness, but not his love. Nathan accepts him and comes out as well. He then confesses his love for Ethan. The notes are still being placed in Ethan's locker and the culprit is later revealed. As the story unfolds, Ethan discovers strength in his gayness and is willing to publically announce who he is.

This book was first written in 1999 and then reprinted in 2012. The story captures abject intolerance of gayness in the high school and focuses on the hyper-heterosexuality of teenage males and their inherent homophobia. The sex in this novel is descriptive with the heterosexual depiction being the most graphic. The book captures a realistic view of a young man's libido, fantasies, and sexual expressiveness. The gay characters in this book do not represent the stereotypical effeminate loner. All the boys are athletes and are viewed as popular. Ethan struggles with his sexuality because his image does not fit the stereotype. There are no adult interventions throughout this book, all the characters problem solve on their own and provide their own sense of justice. Instead of reporting attackers, straight allies, Jon and Brandon, finds out who battered Mark and deliver their own revenge. The book is included here because it is a good example of how queer themes have progressed in adolescent literature because coming out is no longer depicted as life threatening. Teachers could use this book as a comparative text with one of the more contemporary books to deconstruct past and current depictions of queerness and acceptance.

Lesbian

Ask the Passengers by A. S. King - Astrid Jones is a teenager who might be described as typical. She is working through the emotions of understanding her parents and where she fits at school. In addition, Astrid is struggling with her sexual identity. While she loves her family, she does not

feel she can share her love or much of anything about herself with them. The immense amount of love she possesses is shared with passengers, high above her in passing airplanes. It is through Astrid's pseudo discussions with these passengers that readers see her work through self-discovery, the dysfunction of her family, and the narrow mindedness of the small town in which she and her family have just relocated. She is befriended by a couple in her school who appear to have all the characteristics of an ideal heterosexual couple when, in fact, they are both gay. Terrified of being detected, the three of them devise an elaborate plan to keep their secrets. Ultimately, they are *outed* and readers watch as Astrid, her family, her friends, her school, and the community work through the truth.

Astrid's story meets some portion of each of the nine identified criterion. However, only four will be discussed in this annotation. The criterion of curriculum relevance is apparent as we see the characters grapple with secrecy and change. The criterion of literary merit is evident as the book enhances language and cognitive development via the use of a variety of vocabulary structures. There are many opportunities for readers to experience windows and mirror perspectives. While Astrid's dilemma is the primary component, it is more than just Astrid coming to terms with her sexuality; the experiences of the people surrounding her dilemma are significant as well. In addition, the criterion of pride, resiliency, and self-actualization is palpable as readers watch Astrid encounter adversity, work through crisis, and emerge with a sense of self, and of self-confidence.

Transgender

I am J by Cris Beam-J (Jennifer) has known for most of his life that he is in the wrong body. But, he managed that well until puberty when his body began to betray him. Now, a senior in high school, J struggles with the relationships in his life as he tries to come to terms with his inner and physical identities. His best friend, Melissa, turns her back on him, mistaking him for a lesbian. His mother denies J's tendencies, hoping that he will learn to love what he has been given. His father views him as always, "daddy's little girl." J ultimately leaves home for a brief time and takes the opportunity to embrace what he has always known and to begin the process of physically transitioning from female to male. It's during this time away from the friends and family that he has always known that he begins to build a community of support that will help guide him and allow him to simply exist as who he is. The ending is hopeful and realistic.

The literary merit and curriculum connections are quite clear as the writing is a tightly-woven rendering of fear, internal struggle, and denial. This book is an excellent discussion piece for examining how writing sets the tone and mood of a story. The desire for acceptance and understanding is palpable in this text, and many students can relate to that. Every character is complex and well-rounded. Further, the book provides good fodder for discussions about relationships, communication, and coming-of-age. All students will see themselves in this text. Regardless of gender or sex identification, all students struggle with who they are and who they want to become in their adolescence. Mirror opportunities are enhanced when positive self-

images are conveyed in literature. In this case, we see J move from a place of self-hate to self-understanding and self-reliance at an almost painfully slow but realistic pace. Students who struggle with their own identities can look at this text as a window and know that others must also travel the road of self-discovery. Stereotypes, inclusion, diversity, and social justice and equity are all addressed as J's family and friends struggle with the questions and doubts that he has. Ultimately, each character must work through their own beliefs and stereotypes about transgender people, including J. Again, there is a sense that each character will work through their issues at their own realistic and individual paces. Finally, there is one episode where J kisses his best friend who he has been falling steadily in love with over time. Although, Melissa interrupts the kiss and is angry with him and with her own physical response, the book gives J the opportunity to participate in, and the reader to witness, developmentally appropriate acts of sexual intimacy which is a rarity in this field of adolescent literature.

Queer/Questioning

The Flip Side by Andrew Matthews chronicles the experience of Robert Hunt, a fifteen year old high school student who is struggling with his emerging feelings of confusion and excitement after playing the female lead in a class portrayal of a Shakespeare comedy. For the class assignment Robert is paired up with Milena, a young lady he is physically attracted to. With the help of Milena, Robert discovers he enjoys dressing up as a woman because it releases a sense of self-confidence not experienced by Robert at other times. Both Robert and Milena carry on their gender reversal, which fuels their relationship, and attend a party where cross-dressing is required. At the party Robert fully embraces his female character Rosiland, leaving Milena to question whether she is falling for Robert or Rosiland. In the end Robert desires to be with Milena win over his fascination with his Rosiland role, so he closets Rosiland in order to share with Milena his male person.

This book highlights a few of the outlined criteria. The first being sexual expressiveness. While Robert has romantic feelings for Milena, it is not until he is given the opportunity to portray a woman that he finds the courage to express his feelings to her. As Robert's self-confidence as Rosiland grows, so do the written details of Robert and Milena touching, hugging, and kissing, while in portraying the opposite sex. Additionally, this book provides a window into the life of a young man questioning his masculinity as he explores expressing himself as a woman. As readers observe Robert's journey into whether gender is or is not a fixed assignment, readers can consider if gender expression is on a continuum that ultimately leads to self-actualization.

Queer/Questioning

“Standing Naked on the Roof” by Frances Lantz - This short story captures the high school interactions of Jeannie who feels different from everyone else in her school. She proclaims that there supposedly are not any tomboys anymore. She prefers to wear her hair short and simply jeans and a t-shirt. This mode of dress often has her confused as a boy. She knew at an early age

that ballet class and princess frills were not for her. Jeannie's acceptance of her person is intact, but how others perceive and labeling her has become increasingly problematic. There is an incident in which she is dragged into the boys' bathroom and two brutes attempt to take off her jeans in order to determine what sex she was. This attack was interrupted by Reilly who then befriends Jeannie. Jeannie is a poet and Reilly is a disc jockey that spins rap and soul fusion. He convinces Jeannie to put some of her poems to a rap cadence. The story culminates with Jeannie spouting her rap and releasing her true feeling which emancipates her as if she is standing on the roof naked.

This short story captures the criterion of resiliency and acceptance as Jeannie perseveres regardless of the obstacles. She does not know whether she prefers men or women, but she opens herself to the possibilities. This story also provides insights pertaining to feminine hegemony and how heterosexism sets the patterns that are confining and in this case potentially harmful as the bullies harass Jeanie to fit into patterns that they can accept.

Two Parties, One Tux, and A Very Short Film about the Grapes of Wrath by Stephen Goldman - David and Mitchell, two high school friends, are inseparable. Mitchell confesses during lunch that he is gay. Nothing much is said about this, but this disclosure cast David in a tizzy of contemplation. He wondered if he was told because Mitchell might have thought he was gay. He wondered if he might be gay. He wondered if others thought that he and Mitchell were a couple. Mitchell on the other hand is silent about his revelation, but observes how what he confided in his friend has changed how they interacted. Their conversations are stilted and any comments about gayness brought up by others become awkward pauses. The story meanders across the eleventh grade year as the guys prepare a claymation film in their audiovisual course and David decides to submit it as the essay for the reading of the *Grapes of Wrath*, attends parties, experiments with drinking, and rents tuxedos to attend the prom. Mitchell attends with M.C., a long-time family friend of David's sister Carrie. David is appointed to take Danielle, the most popular girl in school. Danielle recently broke up with the most popular boy in school, Ryan. She is using David as a ploy to get back with Ryan unbeknown to David, but highly known to everyone else who sees Danielle playing David for the fool. As David falls for Danielle, his relationship with Mitchell becomes more problematic. In the end, David realizes that Mitchell needed him during this critical period of discovery in his life and David's preoccupation with the film, setting both boys up for the prom, and his fascination with Danielle has made it difficult for Mitchell to express his true feelings for David.

This book focuses on several of the criteria. It challenges stereotypes about gayness because Mitchell is just a guy who plays on the baseball team who confesses he is gay. He is just like David who is questioning his sexuality, but later determines that he is straight. They both are clueless about what to do with their sexuality and how to act on their feelings. This amorphous meandering offsets hegemonic notions of what are the rules for adolescent young men. They try to glom on desperately to what they think should be the heteronormative blueprint, but are simply foiled constantly by their own social ineptness. This book portrays how girls can read the social barometer more readily than boys and empowers them with navigational skills that in the end enable both boys to embrace who they are. There is no malice portrayed toward Mitchell

once his sexuality is revealed and the hijinks of high school is the most pervasive plot convention throughout the book. The book is inclusive of interactions and dispositions around notions of being straight, gay, and questioning.

Conclusion

As teachers, librarians, counselors and others who work with young people enter into the discourse about the effective selection and usages of adolescent queer literature, they must be realize there may be missteps. “Because we are always learning, we must be prepared to make mistakes, reflect on them, learn from them, and improve on them. This work is risky, and as long as heterosexism and homophobia are institutionally supported forms of oppression, it will continue to be so. But this risky work has the potential to dismantle such oppression, and this makes it worth doing.” (Clark & Blackburn, 2009, p. 31).

Our hope is that teachers and librarians use this guide to provide the literature that is inclusive of the adolescents who are in their schools. To offset oppression, an educators must be willing to do the work of reading, aligning the criteria, and selecting those books that can support all their learners and readers.

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