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# Self-Censorship in Selection of LGBT-Themed Materials

## Jennifer Downey, Guest Columnist

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As librarians, many of us like to believe our profession is a noble calling. We stand on the front lines of democracy, providing people with information on all topics and from all points of view so that they can educate themselves and come to informed opinions about both global issues and trivial pursuits. Unbiased materials selection is a vital part of this narrative; in fact, we have enshrined it the self-consciously named Library Bill of Rights, modeled on one of the core documents of American democracy.

So, of course, most librarians would tell you that they would never practice censorship, or allow their professional work to reflect their personal biases. Many will describe their courage in the face of external pressures and challenges to their collections.

But some of the most insidious pressure comes not from external opponents and would-be censors, but from within. Self-censorship is tricky because it's usually invisible—if a library is missing a book, nobody can say for certain why it's missing. Perhaps the library used to have a copy, but it's disappeared or fallen apart. Perhaps it was too expensive compared to similar items. Perhaps the collection on its subject was adequate already, and the selector thought it would be redundant. On the other hand, perhaps it was simply overlooked—all perfectly innocuous and acceptable answers, should anyone ever notice and ask. The innocuous answers, though, provide cover for the less commendable one: the book is missing because the librarian objected to the content, or anticipated controversy and wanted to avoid it, and preemptively censored her own selection.

How do we catch ourselves when we begin to self-censor, and how do we prevent it? Is it ever possible to remove our own beliefs from our decision making about our collections? Jennifer Downey, a public librarian in California, explores these questions as they pertain to LGBT collection development.

This is the first single-author installment of “Taking Issues”—partly, we admit, because we didn't want to ask a contributor to take the position, “Yes, I deliberately bias my collection to reflect my personal beliefs all the time, and I plan to continue.” But, more seriously, we asked Downey to write on this topic in a way that reflects the nature of this debate in practice: a selector's self-censorship happens in private, the result of a debate that largely takes place in his or her own head. We hope that the mental traps that Downey highlights on this issue will inform some librarians' internal debates.—*Editors*

**S**tudies have shown that the vast majority of libraries lack high-quality, comprehensive LGBT collections.<sup>1</sup> This goes for libraries large and small, urban and rural, in red states and in blue states. There are certainly a few exceptions, predominantly in large urban areas. One

superb example is the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center at San Francisco Public Library, which includes a wide assortment of books, magazines, films, photographs, and sound recordings. New York Public Library is home to a large LGBT manuscript and archives collection, as well as the new LGBT@NYPD project, in which vast amounts of LGBT materials are actively being acquired, archived, and publicized. Even outside of large urban hubs like New York and San Francisco, LGBT issues are big news. Media stories abound about LGBT kids facing bullying and alienation, and anti-bullying programs are on the rise to combat this problem. In addition, political changes such as the Supreme Court's ruling against the Defense of Marriage Act have recently brought LGBT issues front and center.

Despite these promising gains, the fact remains that many libraries' LGBT collections are sorely lacking, and satisfaction among LGBT patrons is low. Why is this? Why do librarians passively neglect LGBT collection development instead of being proactive and creative, as we are in so many other areas of collection development? The answer, it seems, has to do with certain traps and myths that are prevalent in our profession. So—gut check time—I implore you to take a deep breath and ask yourself honestly: do you fall into these traps when considering whether to order a “controversial” book?

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### TRAP: IT'S HARD TO FIND LGBT-THEMED BOOKS

While some traditional book review sources such as *Publisher's Weekly* and *Booklist* are short on LGBT book reviews, it doesn't take much searching to discover high-quality, reviewed LGBT-themed books. It's a simple matter of looking at alternate review sources. A visit to ALA's GLBT Round Table ([www.ala.org/glb-trt](http://www.ala.org/glb-trt)) and the Lambda Literary Foundation ([lambdaliterary.org](http://lambdaliterary.org)) can take a librarian a long way toward beefing up a floundering LGBT collection.

Each year, the ALA's GLBT Round Table awards the coveted Stonewall Book Award to one adult literature book, one adult nonfiction book, and one children's or young adult book. The GLBT Round Table also joins forces with ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table to produce the Rainbow List, an annual bibliography of recommended books for children and teens, as well as the Over the Rainbow List for adult books. Newly nominated books are added to the list regularly. A visit to the ALA GLBT Round Table website will also yield many book reviews. A simple search can turn up an abundance of worthy LGBT books for libraries.

The Lambda Literary Foundation, formerly known for the long-running print publication *Lambda Book Report*, provides online reviews and literary resources, online book clubs, and information on writers' retreats. The Lambda Literary Foundation also grants literary awards for LGBT-themed books in the areas of general fiction, fantasy, memoir/biography, romance, and poetry.

Librarians tend to take pride in knowing where to find information. It's an important part of our jobs. As I often tell my

patrons, being a good librarian is mostly a matter of knowing where to look. Seeking out alternative sources is not nearly as difficult or time-consuming as we might fear, and it fits in well with our overall responsibilities. It's really quite simple, once you know your sources.

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### TRAP: THEY DON'T CIRCULATE

From a statistical standpoint, this may very well be true. Circulation rates for LGBT-themed books vary greatly from library to library. But ask any LGBT individual whether, as a child or teen, they searched for books at the library about being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Then ask if they checked those books out, or if they instead sat in a quiet corner, devouring the information page by page but not daring to take the items to the circulation desk, let alone home. This type of book use is sometimes referred to as “stealth” library use, or “under the radar browsing.” You might not see it, and you can't track it. But it's happening, and it's vitally important.

This point is especially important for young people who are “questioning,” or just beginning their journey into the discovery of sexual orientation or gender identity. The process of coming to terms with being a member of an often-criticized community is difficult, and coming out to friends and family is no easier. A wide range of books containing helpful advice, first-person accounts, and a general tone of support are essential to this demographic, regardless of circulation rates. Ultimately, “controversial” books may not circulate well, but take a look at the cracked spines and the worn pages. These books are necessary and important, and they are being read.

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### TRAP: WHAT WILL IT SAY ABOUT ME?

Well, one thing a quality LGBT collection says about you is that you take your position as a purveyor of information seriously. It also says that you are willing and able to handle your professional obligations despite whatever personal discomfort you might feel with the subject matter. We strive to ensure that our collections in the areas of politics, religion, and current events are well-rounded. How is this collection area different?

I recently ordered *The Good Nurse* by Charles Graeber for my library's true crime collection. The book provides a rather graphic account of the activities of a sociopathic hospital nurse, Charles Cullen, who used his position to murder dozens of patients. It's been circulating quite well, and I am pleased to report that I have not had to answer to any concerned community members who fear that I might be a serial killer or that I support the activities of serial killers.

Fear of judgment—or even fear of a backlash from the community—about purchasing LGBT-themed materials is probably the most thorny trap that librarians fall into, and the most difficult to address. In all honesty, strong LGBT collections might make some community members uncomfortable, even angry, and librarians will have the unpleasant task

of responding to those reactions. But the only alternative is to maintain a substandard LGBT collection. A significant segment of your community very well might take offense at your LGBT collection development efforts. But other significant groups in your community—those who are LGBT, or who have family members who are, or who are questioning—*need* those efforts. They might not be as vocal as the dissenters, but this is where the tenets of librarianship come into play—access, equity, inclusiveness, and freedom of information. To allow discomfort to halt your efforts would be unprofessional at best, unethical at worst.

Discomfort leads to avoidance and passivity, which leads to substandard collections. It takes a great deal of soul-searching and courage to admit to our own biases and fears, but it is our obligation to do so. When we avoid ordering certain books out of our own anxiety with the subject or our fear of backlash, we do a grave disservice to our profession and our communities. So, I ask you to ponder this: Why did you become a librarian? Was it because you believe in the freedom to read and learn? Was it because you support the principle of access of information for all people regardless of circumstance? Or was it because you coveted the opportunity to censor and limit your community's reading materials, and to decide who is and is not welcome in your library? Probably not. Access is what we do. It's why we're passionate about our profession. It matters.

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**TRAP: THERE AREN'T ANY (OR MANY) LGBT PEOPLE IN MY COMMUNITY**

Research suggests that between 3 percent and 10 percent of any community is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.<sup>2</sup> If this seems like a small percentage or a special needs area, consider this: about 8 percent of the US population has diabetes, close to 12 percent of women in the United States will be diagnosed with invasive breast cancer at some point in their lives, and a mere 2.6 percent of American adults have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder in any given year.<sup>3</sup> Finding a library without books and resources for people with these conditions would be tough, and the collection development staff would certainly have some explaining to do sooner or later about their negligence in these areas.

There are, of course, higher concentrations of LGBT adults in urban areas like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. But adults, for the most part, have the liberty of deciding where to live—and furthermore, it would be quite silly to claim that all or even most LGBT adults leave their hometowns and flock to more broadminded communities. So, yes, of course it makes sense for the San Francisco Public Library to boast the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center, while libraries in agricultural areas might put more of their resources into books dealing with farming, and libraries in areas with large Spanish-speaking populations might put more attention into collecting Spanish language materials. But there are areas of concentration, and then there are materials that any library

has a responsibility to make available.

And, although adults have choices about where to live, children and teens aren't so fortunate. Nobody has the privilege of deciding where to be born and raised, and LGBT kids grow up all over the place. Being young and LGBT is a risk factor in and of itself: Study after study has revealed higher rates of suicide, depression, and social isolation among LGBT kids than straight kids.<sup>4</sup> To say that bullying—a hot current issue—is directed disproportionately at LGBT kids would be a preposterous understatement. Kids who are different have a tough time, and it's tougher when they don't feel supported or can't get the information they need to grow confidently into their identities. Young LGBT people need to know that they are not alone, and they need the freedom to learn about issues of concern to them. This is how children become adults.

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**TRAP: I DON'T HAVE THE MONEY IN MY BUDGET**

Well, that's for sure. But the things we forego during tight budget times reflect our values. When LGBT materials are the first things to hit the chopping block, a statement is being made that these items are expendable, unnecessary luxuries. Working with a tight budget is no librarian's idea of a good time, but this is where our skills and standards are put to the test. It's difficult, but we have to learn to get by with less while maintaining a comprehensive collection with the resources we have available.

For the most part, when we think of collection development, we think in terms of comprehensiveness. The same stance that leads us to stock our collections in a well-rounded manner also goes for cutting. When the budget shrinks, every area of the collection is probably going to have to take a cut. This is completely understandable, though certainly not pleasant. But a problem arises when we cut only one area, or only the areas with low circulation rates, or only the areas we never really liked anyway. The practice of slashing and burning one or two areas of the collection and blaming the budget is almost too transparent a ploy to ignore. It's an overly simplistic excuse to stop buying the stuff that we never wanted to buy anyway.

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**CONCLUSION**

We librarians have a professional (and, I hope, personal) obligation to be proactive, equitable, and thoughtful in our collection development duties. We also have a responsibility to put our own prejudices and fears aside, and to go about our work with open minds. It's not always easy. It takes courage and self-reflection. It means asking ourselves the tough questions and being honest with our answers. Censorship takes many forms. It can be as obvious as book-burning or as innocuous as simply not knowing where to look. But when we practice self-censorship, we not only harm our patrons, we harm our

profession. The diversity of our communities is part of what makes librarianship so exciting and meaningful. When we can honestly say that we are meeting the needs of our LGBT patrons with openness and friendliness, both in person and in our collections, we can be proud of our work and ourselves.

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