
Gender, Sexuality, and Identity in Fiction

Suggesting New Titles to Make All Readers Feel Like They Belong

Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to Laurel Tarulli, Librarian and Information Services Manager, Sacred Heart School of Halifax; e-mail: laureltarulli@yahoo.com.

Epochs of transition keep us on the alert. They ask us to keep our eyes open upon the distant horizons, our minds listening to seize every indication that can enlighten us: reading, reflection, searching, must never stop; the mind must keep flexible in order to lose nothing, to acquire any knowledge that can aid our mission. . . . Immobility and arrested development bring decadence; a beauty, fully unfolded, is ready to perish. So, let us not rest on our beautiful past.

—Janet Erskine Stuart, RSCJ, 1914

The above quote from Janet Erskine Stuart of the Society of the Sacred Heart, fondly referred to as Mother Stuart, was written in 1914, at a time when the world was in turmoil. A religious congregation that has included many remarkable and forward-thinking women, the Society has a reputation for persevering and growing stronger during times of change. Born out of the French Revolution, the society was formed in France to educate children in a time when a new world was emerging. Education endures as a core value of the Society—and most importantly, the concept of educating the whole person. Indeed, the goals that guide the Society of the Sacred Heart include a deep respect for intellectual values, social awareness, and personal growth in an atmosphere of wise freedom.

Libraries share many of the same qualities as this remarkable Society of educators and persons of faith. At our core, librarians seek to educate and inform communities, social action groups, children, parents, and all other groups and individuals in our society. And we do so in a profession that is both forward-looking and steeped in values and traditions. We don't seek to change what librarianship is and the freedoms and values we represent, but we do seek to put the best resources and books into the right hands, helping to open intellectual doors for our patrons. Readers' services is a crucial part of this mission, providing a richness in readers' lives by equipping them with books that educate and entertain, as often answering questions as providing solitude, comfort, and companionship.

For those of us who work with school-age populations, gender and identity are subjects of great interest for our patrons, and are an area where we librarians can make a significant impact. The children and teenagers who come into our libraries are exploring what gender, sexuality, and identity mean to them personally, to their social groups, and to society at large. I see this in my own work at the Sacred Heart School of Halifax. I am the sole librarian for a co-ed elementary school and a senior school with two divisions: an all-boys school and an all-girls school. Indeed, as one of

a handful of shared, co-ed spaces in the school, the library itself is an important site for students to think about gender. It should come as no surprise, then, that when our library staff began to build a gender and identity collection, it took on a larger purpose than just being a perfunctory effort to show that our school values and promotes gender equity and individuality. Indeed, the books needed to be accessible and readable and needed to appeal to young teens, young adults on their way to university, and parents and faculty. With limited physical space and funds, we worked hard to identify what books would hold an enduring appeal and whether we should take risks with suggestions, pushing the comfort of some of the students and community.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Whether working in a public library or school library, many librarians have been growing our gender and identity collections. Some of us may be building a collection from scratch, others adding to an already strong collection of resources. But the struggles are the same. Which books work for our community of readers? Do some support an unhealthy ideology or perspective? Are the voices in the books antagonistic or likeable? Which books will attract readers, and will they appeal to readers based on the display, cover art, or “word of mouth” recommendations? And finally, how can we conscientiously fulfill our responsibility to decide which publications are “best” in this often-controversial subject area?

This last question is what makes developing a gender and identity collection more challenging than developing other interest areas in the library. Identity is a deeply personal subject, and one that touches on culture, heritage, and religion. There are many interests to consider. Keeping in mind my school’s deep-rooted Catholic heritage as well as our mission to educate a community toward a social awareness that impels us to action, I knew the gender and identity collection couldn’t simply reflect pop culture and couldn’t fail to provide a well-rounded balance of perspectives. This is no different than in most communities, where there might be a strong cultural or immigrant population or other targeted demographic description. What works for one library might not be a suitable collection for another. Even with my knowledge of my own community of readers, I was still faced with these challenges: Where to start? How do I go about finding books to purchase and, ultimately, suggest to my reading community?

This is where readers’ services and collection development tend to overlap. For many of us, it may not be possible to completely separate the need to understand a gender identity *collection* from readers’ services. Working on the collection development side lets us learn what the collection is about and get to know the intentional motives or lack thereof behind the purchase of books that fall into this wide-open and loosely bounded genre.

With this in mind, librarians who are building these collections should have a specific idea of what the collection looks like prior to purchasing. Who will be reading these books? Your readers’ services team will be having conversations with teens and adults seeking suggestions for this topic—what is their comfort level with this? Will you train your team members to be conversant with all of the current terms associated with gender and identity? How will this collection be displayed, and what, if any, challenges might be faced with any collection of this nature? These are all good questions to ask when training readers’ advisors in this area, as well as building, or adding to, a collection.

INCLUSION AND SCOPE

In seeking a well-rounded collection, I kept in mind that the books had to avoid inspiring a feeling of one-sidedness. It goes against our mission to promote a single-minded opinion or collect books that were obvious in promoting one view. As I researched what books to include, the collection began to take shape within a larger definition than I first set out with. Rather than centering on books written only by LGBTQ authors or on LGBTQ themes, the collection evolved into one exploring body image, definitions of gender, stereotypes, and drama around fitting in—particularly teen drama. It also included key titles on mental health. Rather than targeting a specific idea, the collection became organic.

Granted, this works well in a small library with a small community, but it can be massaged to build a strong, unified collection throughout larger library systems. Essential to the optics and marketing of this collection was that none of these topics were exclusive or without relation to another topic. Indeed, creating an all-encompassing collection allowed some of our teen community members to experience an “ah ha” moment when they connected the emotional toll or social structure depicted in the books to what they themselves experience.

In the library catalogue, a new genre heading, “Gender and Identity,” was established so that teens or faculty could retrieve the entire collection in one search. Determining the proper genre title or “label” to attach to this collection, especially considering how wide-ranging it became, was not an easy task. In the end, some of the teens helped choose the collection name. While no single label can be all inclusive, the more socially active students felt that “Gender and Identity” represented something tangible and embodied an awareness they wanted to see achieved, and the more conservative students didn’t find it too aggressive and would not be too uncomfortable if their parents saw them searching it.

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Cover art and specific editions were a consideration when building this collection. Our end goal was to find accessible

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titles and topics that reach out to a teen community ranging from sheltered and conservative, to awkward, to socially active and politically driven! And, through it all, the books must include covers that the majority of students feel comfortable being seen reading. Indeed, when suggesting books, I often found that the cover had a significant impact on the reader's perception of the book.

Whether you work in a small library, special library, or large public library, the demand for this collection and the information it provides is growing. It's also an opportunity for conversations. Frequently, there are groups of teens gathered in the library talking about these books, and recommending others that they are reading. These are enriching conversations for a librarian or readers' services team member to be part of.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

While some readers' advisors have a wealth of knowledge regarding books that focus on gender, identity, or individualism, many others are not interested in or comfortable with this genre, or conversations around it. No matter the comfort level, it's important for us to recognize that our interactions with readers might be emotionally charged, with some approaching us to eagerly read everything we have, while others are hesitant but curious to explore topics on sexuality, gender, and identity. This is where it is helpful to explore the variety of books available in your collections. From a YA perspective, many teens feel more comfortable exploring this topic through fiction—where fictional characters are relatable and fall outside the *stereotypical* protagonist of YA novels. (Indeed, our gender and identity collection is primarily fiction, although some narrative nonfiction titles were selected as well.) Chatting to teens about fictional plots that resonate with them—not fitting in, feeling like they are on the fringe, experiencing the freedom or awkwardness of being different, and so on—makes conversations flow that

might not necessarily happen when discussing real events or people. That becomes too personal. Observing readers' body language and the words they choose when seeking suggestions in this type of collection is essential.

In an effort to share some of the titles that have held an increasing level of appeal to school libraries, as well as public libraries, I've included an appendix that lists well-known and lesser-known books that provide a well-rounded selection for suggestions. Becoming familiar with a handful of titles that address a variety of topics in gender, sexuality, and identity will help support readers' services and create an introductory base for starting that first conversation. One author to point out is David Levithan. A well-known advocate for the LGBTQ community, his books are unique and well-written, and covers a wealth of gender and mental health topics from diverse perspectives. He is definitely an author to keep in your readers' advisory service pocket.

While librarianship is considered one of the most traditional professions, we are leaders in our communities when providing social services and introducing new, innovative, or controversial topics. Like Mother Stuart of the Society of the Sacred Heart, we need to keep our eyes on the horizon, so that our readers can keep informed, work to better the whole person, and access literature that informs and provides pleasure. We need to continue to seek titles that let our readers relate to a protagonist or feel an emotional tug, escape, or captivation in a story. For this, we can look at least in part to fictional books with transgender characters, gay romance, obesity, and mental illness: the growth in popularity and frequency of production of these books show that they are filling a gap and attracting new readers. In the future, suggesting books that center around gender, sexuality, and identity might not feel so controversial or emotional. In the meantime, we as readers' advisors will continue to find new books, themes, and genres that speak to our readers. Our readers will continue to impact and inform our knowledge base while we enter into conversations that make all community members feel a sense of belonging.

APPENDIX. SURE BET GENDER AND IDENTITY TITLES

Been Here All Along by Sandy Hall
Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out by Susan Kucklin
Boy Meets Boy by David Levithan
Breakfast on Pluto by Patrick McCabe
Dumplin' by Julie Murphy
Every Day by David Levithan
The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue by Mackenzi Lee
George by Alex Gino
Girl Mans Up by M-E Girard
The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas
Holding Still for as Long as Possible by Zoe Whittall
If I Was Your Girl by Meredith Russo
Impulse by Ellen Hopkins

Indigenous Men and Masculinities: Legacies, Identities, Regeneration edited by Robert Alexander Innes and Kim Anderson
It's Kind of a Funny Story by Ned Vizzini
The List by Siobhan Vivian
Mezcalero by T. E. Wilson
Openly Straight by Bill Konigsberg
Rethinking Normal: A Memoir in Transition by Katie Rain Hill
A Safe Girl to Love by Casey Plett
Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen by Arin Andrews
Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda by Becky Albertalli
Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher