



Over the past year, considerable discussion has centred on the inclusion of same-sex literature in the school library collection. Whilst decisions are made according to the cultural bylaws of the school and its community, **David Rhodes**, a PhD candidate at University of Sydney offers this insight.

Queer Reading for School Libraries

The presumption of heterosexuality is very much encoded into the fabric of western society and is reinforced and validated in schools. Young people, struggling with their own sexual identity, face many obstacles in self-efficacy, especially if they believe that they may not be heterosexual. Homophobia remains as the last *acceptable* prejudice of the twenty-first century.

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Laws still exist that discriminate against same-sex attracted people. Indeed, many people fail to recognise that there are any *queer* youth at all.

There is much misinformation about same-sex attraction and there are too few safe places for young people to look for answers to their questions about sexuality whether heterosexual, bisexual, transgender or homosexual. Imaginative literature opens up a world of possibilities for young adults. For same-sex attracted youth it can provide the opportunity to see authentic representations of aspects of their own lived experiences, often for the first time.

The extent to which imaginative literature can have an impact on negative attitudes to same-sex attraction may perhaps be minimal. However, it can stimulate discussion where otherwise there may be silence; make the invisible, visible; offer hope and reinforce dreams. It can give a voice to those who may not be able to speak out loud.

The first novel to approach the theme of homosexuality in young adult (YA) fiction was John Donovan's *I'll get there. It better be worth the trip*,

published in the United States in 1969.

The novel is tentative, to say the least, in its approach to homosexuality. While it was published in the same year as the legendary *Stonewall Riots*, the references to homosexuality in the novel are ambiguous and veiled in innuendo. However, this is a landmark novel, which is the first in a growing body of literature for a YA readership that includes an increasingly sensitive and relevant handling of queer issues.

The publication of YA novels with Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer (GLBTQ) content began much later in Australia than the United States and Britain. This may in part be due to the nature of the laws that related to homosexuality in Australia, combined with societal attitudes to homosexuality. In Canada, however, the first locally written and published YA novel with GLBTQ content was not published until 1989, and even then only fifteen titles were published between 1989 and 2001, 'with a total of 26 central or supporting gay and lesbian characters' (Lefebvre 2005, p288).

Eleanor Spence's *A candle for St Antony* was published by Oxford University Press in Britain. Although set in Australia and Europe, the central characters are Australian and the plot unfolds in a largely Australian background.

Being the first Australian novel to address the topic of homosexuality makes this a very important novel in the genre. Reminiscent of Donovan's book, the novel is not explicit in its mention of homosexuality. The boy does not get

the boy at the end of the novel and like the characters of Davy and Altschuler, the reader is left wondering about the later sexuality of the characters. Even the kiss is missing. There is, however, an absence of violence. Unlike similar novels that had been published internationally at this time, no-one dies. Even the dog makes it to the end of the novel without meeting a grisly end.

While *A candle for St Antony* was published in Britain, it was highly commended in the *Australian Children's Book of the Year Award* of 1978. The setting and the plot offer a uniquely Australian twist to a genre that had hitherto only been published in the United States and Britain. While the novel is somewhat dated for use in classrooms as a core text, it is certainly still a readable novel and addresses many relevant issues and could easily be included in a wider reading program.

The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a marked increase in the quality and quantity of YA novels that include same-sex attracted characters. The United States remains the most prolific publisher of these novels with Alex Sanchez, a fertile producer in the genre, with six publications of YA novels with same-sex attracted content by 2007 including the Rainbow trilogy (*Rainbow boys*, *Rainbow High* & *Rainbow Road*), and three other YA novels with same-sex attracted content (*So hard to say* & *The God box*). Sanchez has done much to advance the quality of the literature, including ethnic minority characters, accurate information and positive same-sex attracted themes.

Novels such as Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* and David Levithan's *Boy meets boy* have also developed the quality of the genre, signalling new directions in the portrayal of same-sex attracted characters in YA imaginative literature, providing plots which provide realistic representations of same-sex attracted characters and including ethnic minority characters, which hitherto had been ignored. The character of Min, an American Asian bisexual character in *Geography Club*, is a revolutionary character. This is one of the few YA novels in which a female character, who is not heterosexual, is portrayed as supporting a gay male character. And she is an Asian-American.

This characterisation challenges many of the pre-

existing stereotypes in the genre to date.

Australian publications have also made significant contributions to the genre including Alasdair Duncan's *Sushi Central* and *Metro*; and Doug MacLeod's *Tumble turn*, which challenge existing stereotypes about same-sex attraction, and provide innovative developments in narrative construction.

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Duncan's novel stretches the boundaries of what is acceptable content for a YA readership. The variations in narrative style, the explicit sex scenes and drug use have not been witnessed in previous YA novels with same-sex attracted content. MacLeod's novel has also provided an original twist on traditional representations of early adolescent same-sex attraction. The character of Dominic is both funny and sensitive. His developing email relationship with his gay Uncle Peri provides an affirmation for his emerging sexuality. Uncle Peri is the most empathetic adult character in the novel and his support of Dominic's situation is both refreshing and encouraging.

Despite the recent innovative content and narrative techniques, the publication of Australian YA novels with queer content have been largely without international comment and is only briefly addressed in Australian YA literary criticism, leaving many gaps in the existing research. While YA imaginative literature with same-sex attracted content is relatively low in quantity, the quality does warrant further investigation and analysis.

In 2003, Dr Laurel Anne Clyde estimated that there were 312 publications of imaginative literature for

a YA readership that contained GLBTQ content (2003 p4). In a study that reviewed collection development in libraries, Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt (1998) noted, that '*Neither this abundance nor variety is reflected in most library collections*'. They also suggest that there is

persistent and widespread resistance to routinely collecting materials of interest or usefulness to lesbian and gay library users (ibid, p151-152).

In the United States, Canada and United Kingdom, research (Curry 2000; Norman 1999; Joyce & Schrader 1997; Bryant 1995; Sweetland & Christensen 1995; Creelman & Harris 1990) indicates that GLBTQ literature is under-represented in small to medium sized libraries, if it is included at all.

Library collections for young adults appear to be similarly lacking (if not worse). Research (Spence 2000; Rothbauer & McKechnie 1999; Jenkins 1998) indicates that holdings of books with GLBTQ content for a YA readership varied considerably between library collections. Alex Spence (1999) in a study of *Gay, Young Adult fiction in the public library*, checked the holdings of YA novels with GLBTQ content in the catalogues of ten United States and nine Canadian urban public libraries. He found that while some libraries had substantial holdings, others only had a few titles.

An increasing number of YA novels with GLBTQ content are being published for a YA

readership. While the quality of these texts varies, recent publications in the early years of the 21C suggest that the literary merit of these texts is greatly improved.

In order to make schools safe, inclusive and responsive to the needs of same-sex attracted youth, it is necessary to open up dialogue about sexuality, or to at least make these texts available.

The increased quantity and improved quality of YA imaginative literature has implications for the impetus of teacher librarians and English teachers to make these texts available to students in secondary schools. The variety of narrative techniques employed in these novels and the increasing sophistication of recent publications makes these texts suitable for use in English classrooms, both for close analysis and wider reading.

Despite the publication of a growing body of YA imaginative literature with content related to same-sex attraction, few teachers use these texts and a remarkably low number of school libraries include them in their collections.

The introduction of texts with GLTBQ content is one way that schools can challenge

heterosexism and homophobia. Through the provision of appropriate language, students can be encouraged to discuss sexuality openly in the classroom and challenge preconceived ideas and stereotypes.

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