

## **BRAVERMAN PRIZE ESSAY**

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# **PUBLIC LIBRARY COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT ISSUES REGARDING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF GLBT PATRONS**

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**D**espite the surge in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) awareness and resources that has occurred over the past several decades, the GLBT community often remains the “invisible minority” (Loverich & Degnan, 1999), especially in the public library setting. Even when librarians work to develop collections that reflect the diversity of their communities, the GLBT segment of those communities often goes unacknowledged (Loverich & Degnan, 1999). Librarians have a responsibility to provide quality, fair service. Being public in nature and identification, it is reasonable to expect public library collections to reflect the diversity of their communities.

### *The Current Situation*

Our society has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Fifty years ago (and more recently in many cases), books dealing, either directly or indirectly, with homosexuality tended to present it as a medical or psychological condition needing to be cured or repressed (Oberg & Klein, 2003). Today, the situation is much better. GLBT-themed books and magazines were published in record numbers throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Joyce, 2000). Unfortunately, libraries have not evolved alongside the publishing industry, and GLBT patrons are still not adequately represented in many public library collections. Despite the fact that GLBT people make up a substantial percentage of the overall community (Greenblatt, 2003), many librarians choose to take a passive stance when it comes to collecting GLBT-themed materials, thus perpetuating

the heterosexist status quo and allowing the GLBT population to remain ignored and invisible (Joyce, 2000). Over half of gay males in a 1997 study by Joyce and Schrader reported dissatisfaction with their library services, and many suggested that the GLBT-themed collection needed to be larger and more current. Improved GLBT-themed collections and a more sensitive library staff were the most common suggestions among lesbian library users in a 1993 study by Whitt.

Loverich and Degnan (1999) conducted a study in which 33 of the 92 finalists for the American Library Association's (ALA) Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Book Award were selected, and a random sample of 136 public libraries with a patron base of over 50,000 was drawn. The goal of the project was to determine whether the books could be found on the shelves of the average public library. The results indicated that large libraries held more of the titles than did smaller libraries, and that titles receiving a greater number of reviews were more likely to be found. However, 5 of the 76 libraries held none of the titles at all, and only 3 of the 21 libraries serving over one million patrons held only one, two, or three titles. On a positive note, several of the smaller libraries were found to hold over half the titles. This indicates that it is not the size of the library, or its budget, that determines the acquisition of GLBT-themed books.

Sweetland and Christensen (1995) compared the GLBT-centered *Lambda Book Report*-reviewed titles, including 1992 Lambda Book Award Winners, with titles reviewed in the mainstream book-reviewing source *Publisher's Weekly*, and found that while the Lambda Book Award winners were reviewed about as often as the titles in *Publisher's Weekly*, the non-award-winning books listed in the *Lambda Book Report* were reviewed less frequently. Furthermore, the GLBT-themed books were found to be held in public libraries much less frequently than the *Publisher's Weekly*-reviewed books.

While historically, a correlation exists between the number of reviews a book receives and the inclusion of that book on public library shelves, Sweetland and Christensen concluded that this does not appear to be the case with GLBT-themed books. This suggests that librarians (and book reviewers) routinely reject GLBT-themed titles. Some GLBT-themed books do manage to make it onto the

library shelves regardless of their number (and source) of reviews, usually well-known books with a previous reputation or current notoriety (Sweetland & Christensen, 1995).

One recent study indicates that progress is being made. Ritchie (2001) conducted a study of Illinois public libraries to determine whether collection development efforts were resulting in adequate GLBT representation in the collections. She found that Illinois libraries were doing fairly well, providing a substantial amount of GLBT-related fiction and non-fiction books. She also found that staff attitudes in these libraries were generally positive. Despite these promising indicators, it is clear that work still needs to be done to improve and expand the GLBT-themed collections in public libraries.

#### *Barriers to Inclusion and Expansion of GLBT Materials*

There are many myths and misconceptions about GLBT library patrons. In fact, one of the biggest problems in GLBT library service is the vast amount of prejudice and misinformation. Librarians are often misinformed or indifferent regarding the issues and needs of their GLBT patrons (Greenblatt, 2003), and this often manifests itself in the form of explanations or excuses for why a public library maintains inadequate GLBT-themed resources. For example, librarians often assume that their libraries do not have any GLBT patrons, or that no GLBT individuals exist within the community (Gough, 1990; Greenblatt, 2003; Joyce, 2000). Some librarians believe that collecting GLBT-themed books serves as an endorsement of a GLBT lifestyle (Greenblatt, 2003; Joyce, 2000), and that GLBT-related books are too difficult to find and purchase (Gough, 1990; Joyce, 2000). Others insist that GLBT-themed materials can just as easily be obtained through interlibrary loan procedures and are therefore not needed at individual sites (Gough, 1990; Joyce, 2000). Children's librarians sometimes believe that young adult readers are either not interested in GLBT-themed resources or are at risk of being traumatized or harmed by their content (Joyce, 2000). Some librarians are simply uncomfortable with GLBT topics and believe that avoiding the issue altogether will prevent controversy (Greenblatt, 2003). It is important to remember that librarians have a professional obligation to avoid exclusion and censorship of materials, regardless of their personal feelings.

The fact that GLBT patrons are often quite private about their information needs, undoubtedly due in part to societal stigma, might make their needs less obvious to library staff than those of other patrons. GLBT patrons may feel uncomfortable checking out materials or discussing their information needs with library staff. This might lead some library employees to believe that there are no GLBT patrons using their libraries (Greenblatt, 2003).

Some librarians consider GLBT-themed materials a “special needs collection” and insist that they are not appropriate for a public library, and others feel that GLBT-themed materials are too technical in nature to be housed in a public library collection. They may also believe that their vendors do not handle GLBT-themed materials or that there is no room in their budget for GLBT-related resources (Gough, 1990). As we will see in the “Suggestions and Solutions” section of this paper, there are ways to overcome these obstacles and provide proper service.

#### *Internal Censorship*

While most librarians have been educated about the perils of censorship and book-banning, many unwittingly practice a subtle form of censorship during their day-to-day collection development strategies. Berman (2001) labels this practice “inside censorship,” and defines it as the failure to select certain categories or genres of materials, despite public desire or demand. “Inside,” or internal, censorship, also may involve irresponsible weeding of the library’s collection, inadequate cataloging, and denying library staff the opportunity to express themselves by creating an atmosphere of intimidation (Berman, 2001). Internal censorship is often unacknowledged and difficult to prove. For a librarian who feels uncomfortable or homophobic about GLBT-related materials, this form of neglect is easier, and appears more innocuous, than outright book-banning. Internal censorship, which may be either deliberate or unwitting, is a problem in many public libraries (Tsang, 1990). It is therefore crucial for public libraries to collect and properly catalog GLBT materials, thus saving them from invisibility.

The creation of barriers, such as sequestering “controversial” books in guarded areas and requiring patrons to specifically request them, contributes to an overall atmosphere of restriction. This can be a

compounded problem for GLBT patrons, for whom the simple act of borrowing a GLBT-themed book might be a coming-out activity. Having to request a book from a restricted area or through inter-library loan makes this act less likely to occur (Tsang, 1990).

As Loverich and Degnan (1999) point out, librarians are gatekeepers – the people who decide what their communities would like to read. This is a serious responsibility, and one that must take the entire community into account – not just the most visible segments thereof. Librarians have a professional responsibility to realize that censorship does not only come from outside forces. Sometimes the most destructive forms of censorship are the subtle ones taking place every day within the library itself.

#### *Young Adults' GLBT-Related Information Needs*

Adolescence is tough, and this is especially true for GLBT young adults. GLBT youth experience frequent isolation, which places them at risk for violence, homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide (Hughes-Hassell & Hinckley, 2001), as well as academic failure and dropping out of school (Jenkins, 1990). Librarians are in the powerful and important position of being able to help reduce these risks by providing access to quality GLBT-themed young adult (YA) materials, and by helping direct young adults to GLBT-centered organizations and agencies. Jenkins (1990) states: “Young people often gain their first information about homosexuality from books.” Considering the many risks GLBT adolescents face, the importance of providing adequate GLBT-related YA resources cannot be overestimated. It is no exaggeration to say that the right resources could save a life.

GLBT young adults deal with constant ignorance and homophobia, and many learn to cope by becoming as invisible as possible (Jenkins, 1990). High schools are notoriously homophobic in atmosphere, and staying below the radar is sometimes a necessary survival skill. This self-imposed invisibility is compounded for these vulnerable young adults by the frequent practice of teachers and other adults of ignoring GLBT issues. Librarians contribute to this atmosphere of ignorance when they do not supply adequate GLBT-themed YA books and materials. This not only deprives GLBT youth of finding materials they can relate to, it also means that heterosexual and

simply curious patrons will be less likely to come across information providing insight into GLBT life, thus contributing to heterosexism and societal ignorance (Clyde & Lobban, 2001).

Since the YA book *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*, by John Donovan, was published in 1969, there has been an explosion of GLBT-themed books for young readers (Jenkins, 1990), but these books are still in short supply in libraries and are disproportionately likely to end up on lists of challenged and banned books (Clyde & Lobban, 2001). Many of these books are difficult to find in trade bibliographies and are often available only through small presses or as trade paperbacks (Clyde & Lobban, 2001).

GLBT-themed YA books have come a long way since *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*, which portrayed homosexuality as negative and had an unhappy ending. *While I'll Get There* was a groundbreaking book – one of the first well-known YA books in which a main character explored his attractions to the same sex – the YA books being published today tend to present a more positive view of GLBT life. Early GLBT-themed YA books were heavy on violent themes, indicated that homosexuality was related to family dysfunction or early childhood trauma, were discouraging of GLBT life, and presented GLBT characters as predominantly white, male, and middle-to-upper class (Mulholland, 2003). While today's GLBT-themed YA books still feature characters who are disproportionately white and male (Clyde & Lobban, 2001; Mulholland, 2003), they represent a departure from those somber cautionary tales, and are often funny, positive, and uplifting (Pavao, 2002). Books such as Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind*, Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow High*, and David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* present GLBT characters as complete and complex people, not stereotypes whose lives revolve around sexuality or who are surrounded by violence and a lack of acceptance. In addition, GLBT parents are now more recognized in YA literature (Mulholland, 2003). Unfortunately, GLBT-themed YA books are still being challenged and censored, even when they are critically well-reviewed (Pavao, 2002).

It might be tempting for librarians to believe that GLBT-themed YA books are not often used because of the fact that they do not always have high circulation rates. Young adults may feel reluctant to check

these books out, but this does not mean they are not being used. The librarian's role is to provide access, whether the materials circulate or not (Jenkins, 1990).

GLBT young adults are an at-risk group, who must deal with discrimination and stigmatization. Teachers often compound this problem by continuing to believe that no GLBT students exist within their classrooms. Positive GLBT-themed YA literature is essential to these students.

### *Suggestions and Solutions*

While many libraries have inadequate GLBT-themed collections, there are some that stand out as examples to follow. The Berkeley Public Library and the Oakland Public Library, both in California's Bay Area, have been proactive in their efforts at building extensive GLBT-themed collections (Bledsoe, 1995). The Oakland Public Library marks its GLBT-themed books with a rainbow sticker on the spine for easy identification. The San Francisco Public Library is home to possibly the largest and best collection of GLBT-themed materials in any public library, with a thriving Gay and Lesbian Center containing books, magazines, films, sound recordings, photographs, and other materials. A library in need of improved services to GLBT patrons might do well to follow and expand upon these examples.

GLBT-themed collection development efforts must be proactive. Berman (2001) suggests that librarians "consciously and energetically identify, secure, and publicize much more non-conglomerate, diverse, and lively material." Oberg and Klein (2003) state: "If we do not systematically and adequately collect gay-themed materials, we ignore a literature of growing importance and the immediate needs of a considerable segment of our user community." They recommend that libraries conduct an environmental scan of their communities to determine the needs for GLBT-themed resources, make collection development of GLBT-themed resources an item in their policy statements, set aside part of the budget for GLBT-themed materials, make librarians responsible for improving GLBT-themed collections, publicize GLBT-themed materials to the community, not rely so much on interlibrary loan and consortial collections for

GLBT-themed materials, and consult specialized resources such as the *Alternative Press Index* to improve their collections.

Loverich and Degnan (1999) suggest bringing more people into the collection development process, and suggest that librarians need to be proactive and make an effort to find alternative sources, such as the *Lambda Book Report*. Similarly, Sweetland and Christensen (1995) suggest that librarians should regularly turn to the *Lambda Book Report*, as well as the American Library Association's Gay and Lesbian Round Table Awards, in addition to their usual selection guides, to help ensure that GLBT-themed books receive proper attention.

Regarding YA resources, librarians must challenge the idea that young people can and should be sheltered or "protected" from information about GLBT issues and same-sex attraction. This dangerous notion of "appropriateness" makes YA collections especially vulnerable to censorship and challenges (Jenkins, 1990).

Avoiding myths and traps involves a proactive approach as well (Greenblatt, 2003). Heterosexist attitudes among library staff are common, and this may be evident in how GLBT patrons are treated. Quantity and quality are important in a GLBT-themed collection, as are availability and user-friendliness. Special displays, handouts, tours, and instruction sessions are all ways a public library can highlight its GLBT-themed collection. Special bookmarks with information about the collection may be handed out, book lists with titles of GLBT-related books may be displayed and distributed. Study guides and pathfinders may be made available, lists of GLBT organizations may be displayed, and the library's cataloging system may be revamped to adequately represent GLBT-themed holdings. Libraries may also offer meeting space for GLBT groups and actively promote the library in the GLBT community.

Librarians have an obligation to challenge the myths and misconceptions that prevail about GLBT patrons and their information needs. Selection must not be influenced by homophobia or discomfort. Internal censorship can only be stopped through library workers' proactive stance and creativity (Tsang, 1990). Learning more about GLBT people and their information needs is part of a librarian's responsibility. Idly assuming that one's library has no



GLBT patrons, or that they are perfectly happy using interlibrary loan services, is a neglectful stance that must be resisted.

All of the suggestions and solutions listed above have one element in common – they take effort. Being proactive is clearly the key to providing an adequate collection of GLBT-themed materials.

GLBT issues have grown in acceptance as society has evolved, and libraries must keep up with the times. In a spirit of partnership and proactive thinking, librarians can help ensure that the “invisible minority” receives the attention and information it deserves.

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