"Don't Let Ignorance Win:" Gay and Lesbian Characters in Adolescent Literature

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The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network of Colorado (GLSENCO) has a maxim posted on their website. When a visitor to their "cyber home" clicks on a tab that is labeled "TRUTH" this saying appears: "You may teach a class that is all male or female. You may teach a class that is all white or all black or all Chicano, but you will probably never teach a class that is all straight." It can be argued that adolescence is the most significant time in a person's social, mental, spiritual, and emotional maturation. Due to unprecedented exposure to new cultural situations, both socially and intellectually, the years from age 13-19 consist of significant teachable moments that can leave lifetime impressions. Physiologically, the brain is solidifying the pathways that will become the mental and emotional framework of an adult worldview. Sexually, teens are experiencing new feelings and many be confused about their sexual orientation. For these reasons, it is necessary to include in a classroom or school library reading material that positively portrays gay adolescent characters. This should be done not only for the sake of gays and lesbians that are occupying seats, but also for the heterosexual class members who may have questions about their gay peers. Because of these factors, books with homosexual characters serve a dual role. They assist in the combating ignorance about homosexuality and decreasing the fear that is typical of homophobic. Consequently, the potential for physical and psychological violence that can accompany intolerance of this kind is reduced because fear has been replaced with understanding through the process of education.

A New York Times/CBS News poll confirms the potential for trouble within the adolescent population. When 1,083 teenagers, aged 13-15, were asked the following questions,

their answers suggested that homophobic attitudes could easily germinate in such fertile soil.

Those who were polled already voiced an unwillingness to accept gay and lesbian couples.

Table 1

Question: "Do you think sexual relations between people of the same sex are always okay, okay some of the time, or do you think gay or lesbian relations are always wrong?"

	Always OK	Some of the time	Always Wrong	DK/NA
Total (in percentages)	16	25	54	5
Girls	20	27	49	4
Boys	13	23	59	6
13-15	14	25	55	5
16-17	18	24	54	4

Source: from CBS/New York Times Poll, conducted October 10-14, 1999.

Table 2

Question: "Do you have a close family member or friend who is gay or lesbian?"

	Yes	No	DK/NA
Total (in percentages)	13	86	1
Girls	14	85	1
Boys	13	87	-
13-15	12	87	1
16-17	16	83	-

Source: from CBS/New York Times Poll, conducted October 10-14, 1999.

Table 3

Question: "Do you know anyone in your grade at school who is gay or lesbian?"

	Yes	No	DK/NA	Not in school
Total (in percentages)	35	61	1	3
Girls	36	59	2	4
Boys	34	63	1	

13-15	24	73	2
16-17	53	43	1

Source: from CBS/New York Times Poll, conducted October 10-14, 1999.

Table 4

Question: "Do gay and lesbian students in your school ever get made fun of and abused by other students, or are they generally treated the same as most other students - or don't you know of any gay or lesbian student in your school?"

	Made fund of/ abused	Treated the same	Don't know any	DK/NA
Total (in percentages)	23	22	51	
Girls	24	25	47	1
Boys	23	20	54	1
13-15	19	18	60	1
16-17	20	29	36	-

Source: from CBS/New York Times Poll, conducted October 10-14, 1999.

Table 5

Question: "Have you yourself ever made any anti-homosexual remarks, or not?"

	Yes	No	DK/NA
Total (in percentages)	22	77	1
Girls	14	85	-
Boys	29	70	1
13-15	19	81	-
16-17	26	73	1

Source: from CBS/New York Times Poll, conducted October 10-14, 1999.

Polls such as this suggest that we, as a society, need to do a better job of teaching tolerance. If our society is to continue to become more unified and accepting, students of the 21st Century

must not be misinformed about their homosexual neighbors. This ignorance is the biggest contributing factor to homophobia that could lead to violence, both physical and psychological. Additionally, gay adolescents often feel isolated and friendless. Many individuals are rejected by their families and friends whenever their sexual orientation is revealed. Some run away but others feel that suicide is the only way out. A national organization that supports the friends and families of gays and lesbians, PFLAG, offers several other troubling statistics on their website in an attempt to increase the public's awareness the need for further understanding for and about gay teens:

> Male Homosexuality: The Adolescent's Perspective reports that fifty percent of gay and lesbian youth report parental rejection because of their sexual orientation. Twenty-six percent of gay and lesbian youth are forced to leave home because of conflict with family members about their sexual orientation. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice show that homosexuals are the most frequent victims of hate crimes. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services studies show that gay and lesbian teens are two or three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. In another study, "Homosexualities: A Study of Human Diversity" reports that of 686 gay men, 337 heterosexual men, 293 lesbian women and 140 heterosexual women: eight percent of gay men attempted suicide, compared to three percent of heterosexual men. The average age of these men is fifteen and a half. Twenty-three percent of lesbians attempted suicide compared to fourteen percent of heterosexual women (PFLAG website).

Another false assumption prevalent in our society, that homosexuals are few in number, is another important belief that needs to be corrected. Attempts to numerically confirm the

homosexual teen population in the United States is, at best, difficult and inaccurate. Many adolescents are unsure of their sexual orientation or are closeted: unwilling to admit to others, and possibly themselves, that they are gay. The first attempt at statistically confirming the number of homosexual individuals was made in 1947 by Alfred Kinsey. His oft-quoted Sexual Behavior in the Human Male is the source of the now-mythic statistic that one out of every ten individuals are gay. Several other studies have confirmed this research, including a poll taken in 1994 by Louis Harris estimates that two million young men and women out of the 24.6 million adolescents recorded in the 1990 Census were homosexual.

Although this information serves as good reminder that there are gays and lesbians in our midst, it is easy for a quest for numbers to obscure the individuality and the attention that needs to be given to this ignored segment of the population. This omission holds true as well within the confines of the English classroom. Gay and lesbian characters in adolescent literature have been largely ignored or marginalized by the authors and the publishing houses. Michael Cart, former president of the ALA's Young Adult Library Division, began his presentation at the 1996 NCTE Fall Conference with a bold suggestion:

> Let me start with an understatement: our society does not make it easy for young people, regardless of their sexual orientation, to find accurate, nonjudgmental, comprehensive information about homosexuality; it makes it even more difficult for young homosexuals to find positive role models in fiction either written and published expressly for them or-if published for adults-relevant to them and to their lives. (1)

Cart remarks that as of 1996, there were less than seventy-five books, which had appeared in print that contained homosexual characters (1). “If you believe, as I do, that literature has the power to save lives”, Cart remarks, “perhaps you will agree that seventysomething is a shamefully small number … “ (1). This “power to save” arises from two of the “most viable components” of adolescent literature (2). Cart argues, “One [component] is the shock of recognition, the sudden, amazing realization that one is not alone, that there are others like me out there. The second is, simply, hope for acceptance, for happiness, and …for being loved and cared about like everybody else” (2). The author infers that the English classroom is a place in which these issues can be addressed and discussed with potential openness. Through the act of reading and experiencing well-selected literature, ignorance and intolerance can be combated. Nancy St. Clair, in an article titled “Outside Looking In: Representations of Gay and Lesbian Experiences in the Young Adult Novel,” agrees that literature can possess the power to lead the way for personal change and growth. She shares her experiences about a class she teaches at a small college in Iowa called “Women’s Literature, Women’s Lives”:

> **I**n spite of the fact that we cover these works [gay and lesbian experience novels] towards the end of the semester when attention generally begins to flag, students usually cite this unit as their favorite in their end-of-the-semester evaluations. I expect there are many reasons for this, but two stand out in my mind. For the straight students, the course offers the opportunity to study a culture they are curious about, but which the homophobia, so prevalent in student life, prevents them from freely exploring. My course, then, becomes a mandate to explore, that which is taboo for many of them. For lesbian students the unit offers both a

validation of their experience and an arena where their voices can be heard (1).

M.E. Kerr's Deliver Us From Evie and Nancy Garden's Annie on My Mind, and Alice Walker's The Color Purple are excellent examples of affirming books that would be a valuable asset to a school library or a classroom bookshelf. Each book offers to its reader at least one positive homosexual character and a realistic depiction of a supportive network, family or friend.

Kerr's Evie Burrman, 18-year-old senior, the title character in 1994's Deliver Us From Evie, is a down to earth young woman. She is loyal to her family consisting of her mother, her father, and her brother, 16 year old Parr, who serves as the story's sympathetic narrator. Evie's family is close knit: they talk freely, play games, and go to church together when it is possible. Evie is certain that she will remain in her hometown permanently and do what she loves the most: work on the family farm. This changes when Evie meets and falls in love with 19-year-old Patsy Duff, a banker's daughter with a wild streak. The young women become acquainted at a Christmas party and are immediately attracted to one another. They feel compelled to lie to their parents about their whereabouts and frequently leave town in order to be together. Over the next few months, their relationship grows stronger. Eventually, their relationship, although not publicly flaunted, is pushed into the spotlight by Cord Whittle, an 18-year-old drop out and farmhand that had a crush on Evie. He suspects a growing intimacy between Evie and Patsy and "outs" the girls with a sign hung in a public location that read "Evie + Patsy." Matters are further complicated by the fact that Evie's father needs to get a loan from Patsy's dad in order to purchase new equipment for the farm that is being threatened by an out of town agribusiness venture. This loan opportunity is endangered by the relationship between the girls because Patsy's father believes that the responsibility for the start of the relationship belongs to Evie.

After Patsy's father forbids his daughter to see Evie, the couple realizes that a stable relationship would be impossible to carry on in their hometown. Evie and Patsy move to New York without the consent of their parents. They make a new successful new life for themselves in their adopted city. The book concludes with a visit from the young couple following a flood that wipes out much of the family farm. Although property was lost, the book ends on a positive note. It seems that Evie's family will accept her relationship with Patsy. Parr shouts to Evie as she is driving away, "'Tell Patsy hi!'" after her mom called out: "'Don't you two be strangers.'"

As Cart notes, this book is readable and has appeal to both gay and straight individuals. He states, "Evie's sexual identity is a major theme of the book but not the only one—the precarious plight of the family owned farm in an age of agribusiness is also artfully and skillfully integrated into the plot" (6). The novel is about more than about being gay, it's about a person coming to terms with her sexuality in the context of a real life and reacting to issues involving her family and her future in a productive and realistic way.

Another theme appearing in Kerr's novel is the practice of sexual stereotyping that is practiced by both gays and straights. Evie has a "butch appearance." She loves to work on her family's rural farm—not afraid to be seen in public wearing overalls and muddy boots. She likes her hair very short and refuses to wear a dress. Evie's appearance is stereotypical, but is so with a definite purpose. Kerr writes about the evolution of her personal attitudes toward stereotyping in her forward to Roger Sutton's Hearing Us Out: Voices From the Gay and Lesbian Community, She recalls:

> In our East End Gay Organization group, we talked about how, early into our own self-acceptance, we could not yet tolerate those among us who "looked it." I remember one of the first appearances of male and female homosexuals on an

> afternoon TV talk show in the 70's. We sat waiting for it to begin, holding our breath and hoping the men wouldn't be too nance, the women too butch. It took a while to grasp the meaning of gay pride, and that it did not mean looking and acting as straight as possible (ix).

Subsequently, Evie possesses that knowledge that her creator had acquired through experience. In a climatic scene, Evie's mom, after finding an expensive gift for Evie from Patsy, says: "If this is *true*, if you really are what you say you are, all the more reason to fix yourself up a little. Be more presentable. Be a little more feminine" (85). They argue about Evie's manner of dress, including her favorite coat—her brother's leather bomber jacket. Then Evie said, "Some of us look it mom! I know you so called normal people would like it better if we looked as much liked all of you as possible, but some of us don't, can't, and never will! And some others of us go for the one's who don't, can't, and never will" (85-86). In this scene, Evie is beginning to understand what real gay pride is: accepting self and sexuality equally, no matter how that self-acceptance may manifest itself or how uncomfortable your presence may be for others. Wisely, Evie knew that if she dressed to please her mother or her community, it would be antithetical to her true self. Evie knew that her decision to come out would not be taken seriously. Evie's honesty and self-knowledge makes her a positive gay character in this excellent adolescent novel.

Nancy Garden's Liza from Annie on My Mind is another complex but positive character that is struggling to come to terms with her newly awakened sexuality. As the novel opens, the reader learns that Liza Winthrop, a freshman at MIT, is, according to St. Clair, "in a state of emotional paralysis, haunted by her past and undecided about her future" (1). Gardner makes clear that Liza must deal with her past before she can allow herself to have any kind of future.

The protagonist has not allowed herself to reflect during the previous six months upon what she experienced with Annie Kenton, her best friend and lover. Because she has not allowed permitted herself to draw conclusions from her confusion, St. Clair argues that it "has left her incapable of doing the academic work she professes to love"(2). She decides to write Annie a letter. This attempt to understand has a painful but therapeutic effect on its writer. Annie and Liza's story is told to the reader as Liza attempts to smooth the wrinkles of her past. The reader learns that Liza and Annie are from opposite side of the socio-economic scale. Annie's family drives cabs and lives in a small apartment. Liza is the daughter of a wealthy professional mother and father. They own their own house. Liza attends a private school, Foster Academy, where she is the class president. The girls first meet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in a display of ancient suits of armor. Their next "date" involves a trip to The Cloisters. These settings are certainly "other worldly" and both girls engage in make believe with one another. They take on personas that are very different than their own. These initial meetings are important to the theme because they foreshadow the young lovers' future need to search for a place where they will be able to be together peacefully when the real world turns hostile. St Clair argues:

> Settings are of great importance in this novel of discovery because they are so thematically aligned with different facets of the girls' relationship. Liza and Annie's first two meetings take place in settings that contain both the past and present and the possibility of easy shifts from fantasy to reality…Annie and Liza's play-acting has thematic repercussions. It allows the girls space in which to explore their attraction for one another while introducing one of the main challenges they will face as lovers: how to create a space for themselves in a world hostile to their relationship (5).

Although their imagined worlds initially create sanctuary, both young women come to recognize that it can function only as a temporary oasis: an important realization for the couple. After this crucial point in their relationship has been reached, Liza and Annie begin to face being gay and living in the real world. St. Clair remarks that, "The rest of Annie on My Mind examines what reality is for two young women coming to grips with their sexuality and trying to find models around which to structure their lives" (6). Two potential role models for Annie and Liza are two teachers at Liza's school, Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widner, a lesbian couple that keep their private lives to themselves. Coincidentally, the women ask Liza to house sit for them while they go out of town. After a bit of snooping about, the girls realize that Ms. Widner and Ms. Stephenson are more than housemates: they are a committed gay couple. With this knowledge, Liza and Annie feel comfortable in creating a temporary haven in the house that belongs to the absent teachers. The girls feel that their relationship is being affirmed by the coincidence of both couples being gay and proceed to take advantage of the position that Liza was entrusted with. On the night before the teachers are due back home, Liza and Annie decide to spend the night at Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widner's home. A concerned but religious zealot of a teacher, missing Liza in school, comes looking for her. When she finds both girls obviously dressed for bed and exiting from the same room as they answer the door, she begins a rant and raves that has serious repercussions for Liza, Annie, as well as Ms. Widner and Ms. Stephenson. Liza is almost dismissed from school. The teachers are fired from their positions because of the negative influence that they have on their pupils. Although their dismissal is unjust, the teachers take the decision in stride. As the book concludes, Annie and Liza go to visit the teachers, feeling very responsible for their situation. The couple assures them that the situation was bad, but not the worst it could be. Ms. Stevenson remarks:

> Liza, Liza, forget about our jobs; forget that for now. This is the thing to remember: the very worst thing for Kah [Ms. Widmar] and me would be to be separated from each other. Or to be so worn down, so guilt-ridden, and torn apart, that we couldn't stay together …You did nothing to us … remember that. Please. Don't—don't punish yourselves for people's ignorant reactions to what we all are … Don't let ignorance win," said Ms. Stevenson. "Let love" (232).

When the book concludes, Liza is taking that wise advice to heart. She calls her true love and makes a promise to pick Annie up at the airport. She says, "'Annie, Ms. Widmer was right. Remember—about the truth making one free? Annie-I'm free now. I love you!' And in a near whisper: 'I love you, too, Liza. Oh God, I love you, too!'"(236). This story presents its reader with a realistic depiction of what young people go through in accepting their homosexuality. It a novel that demonstrates the beauty of a strong homosexual love but does not overly romanticize the relationship in the face of an unaccepting society.

Like Liza and Evie, Alice Walker's Celie from The Color Purple is another fine example of a positive gay character that is faced with many dilemmas—her repressed homosexuality only one of many. Celie's story, told in epistolary form, is a tale of an African-American woman that triumphs over difficult circumstances and grows stronger through the trials she is faced with throughout her life. Early in life, a man she believes to be her father sexually abuses Celie. The incestuous assaults produce two children, both of whom are taken away upon their birth. Also, Celie's sister, Nettie, runs away from home and loses contact with her sister. As the story progresses, Celie is given to a man that she refers to as "Mr." Initially, Mr. and his family abuse Celie to horrific proportions but Celie remains faithful to her new family partly out of far and partly because Celie was a tremendously loyal person. Later in the story, Shug Avery, a self-

actualized entertainer, enters Celie's life. Mr., who has maintained a long-term love for the exotic woman, brought Shug to his home to get well. Celie nurses Shug back to physical health while Shug offers Celie a new way of looking at life. In addition to becoming Celie's first real lover, Shug becomes, as described by Vincent Lankenwish, a New Jersey high school English instructor, "Celie's salvation as she showers Celie with affection and encourages Celie's discovery of her own independence and strength as a woman" (220). Tremendous growth takes place within the once shy Celie. This new outlook affects those around her who, in turn, grow and positively change as well. As the novel ends, Celie is reunited with her children and her sister. Mr., who Celie comes to call Albert, following his personal transformation, stays close by, and Shug settles down and moves in with Celie. Now, Celie truly knows what it means to be alive. She states, "I feel a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grown. And I think they see me and Nettie and Shug and Albert …real old and don't know much what going on. But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt" (295). Lankenwish argues that The Color Purple is one of the most accessible gay literature books to use in a classroom that "teenagers many encounter and consider more fully the legitimacy of gay relationships while, at the same time, gaining insight into the experience of African-Americans during the first half of the twentieth century" (220). There are several reasons for his statement. First, Celie's character is very appealing to most readers because of her "candor" (220). Through her letters, readers realize that Celie is a very sensitive individual, taking to heart and learning from the difficult situations of life while maintaining a positive attitude. Additionally, Celie is a real character. The dialect and gentle tone that Walker employed for Celie's character makes Celie a person that few people could not listen to. Furthermore, Lankenwish believes that Walker's novel is very effective in the classroom because "lesbianism

is only one facet of this controversial story involving misogyny, racism, and British imperialism. The relationship between Celie and Shug may seem a little less threatening to students; there are many other issues to divert their attention from it" (221). Certainly, The Color Purple is a tree ripe for the picking and would serve well as a classroom text.

Lankenwish incorporated Walker's masterpiece into his curriculum after his first year of teaching. He felt the need to present to his students a positive and life affirming depiction of gay relationship following the reading and subsequent classroom discussions of James Dickie's Deliverance, in which a brutal rape of two men by a group of "deep south hillbillies" occurs. After class reflections left Lankenwish "disturbed by the conclusions about gay life that my students might come to from the novel. Some critics might argue persuasively that the word 'gay' is not even applicable to the hillbillies; still, I could not help feeling that my students were left with the impression that these backwoods criminals were examples of 'typical' gay men—grotesque degenerates who secretly sodomize innocent victims"(221). Lankenwish's sensitivity to possible negative character impressions is commendable. Both teachers and writers need to work to develop this sensitivity to their words and actions. Unfortunately, some individuals with the best of intentions create material that leaves its readers with stereotypical characters or turned off by inflammatory language or tertiary rendering of homosexual relationships.

In contrast to these titles are Rosa Guy's Ruby and Bette Greene's The Drowning of Stephan Jones. There are stories that were conceived by socially conscious authors with good intentions that, ironically, do more harm than good. Greene created characters that unwittingly propel negative gay and lesbian stereotypes and Guy dismisses homosexual inclinations of her characters as easily as one would discard a no longer needed shawl. Patrick K. Finnessy, author of "Drowning in Dichotomy: Interpreting The Drowning of Stephan Jones," agrees that books

like Guy's and Greene's "prove that just because gay literature is available now more than ever before does not mean that it is good or nourishing: a banquet can be plentiful, but that fact does not mean that the food is healthy or tasty. The simple presence of gay literature is not enough: it has to be good, healthy, meaningful literature" (2). Certainly, an awareness of gay literature titles and content are of critical importance for English teachers.

Bette Greene's The Drowning of Stephan Jones is a novel that falls short of the standards of great adolescent gay literature set by Walker, Garden, and Kerr. Undoubtedly, Greene began this project with the best of intentions. She was inspired by a real event in which a group of high school students, led by a young man that was on a religious rampage, who drown a gay man. According to Greene her novel" is personal in that I feel so personally violated by it, and yet, it's not directly my story. I am straight and have been married to the same man for 34 years, but I don't understand brutalizing somebody because they are physically attracted to people in ways that I may not be … I'm deeply offended by injustice" (6). She correctly asserts in a interview that appeared in the ALAN Review that:

> "Homophobia is endemic in America … A great amount of it is coming from fundamental Christianity. I've gone to the churches of the young men who were the victimizers. On the tube I see the ever-grinning Pat Robertson. I watch the Trinity Network and the Eternal Word Network. What spews forth is a river of hate. Nobody can ever be more in error when they insist that they, and they alone, speak for God (7).

Certainly, Greene's sincerity cannot be doubted; however, she let her rage blind her in the character development and dialogue of her book.

In this novel, sixteen-year-old Carla Wayland falls in love with fundamentalist, popular, good-looking Andy Harris. Like all good fundamentalists, Andy hates homosexuals. Stephan Jones and his partner Frank Montgomery live in a nearby town. After a chance meeting in a local store, Andy and his friends realize that Frank and Stephan are gay and begin a systematic harassment of the couple. Carla, taught by her liberal mother librarian Judith to stand up for all people, decides she wants to fit in with the in crowd and says very little about Andy's gang and their cruelty. Eventually, on prom night, the gay couple's vehicle breaks down in the middle of nowhere. They are forced to walk into town to get help. During their stroll, the men encounter Andy and gang with Carla. Sensing that they are in danger, Stephan and Frank split up, running, trying to get away from their predators. The gang catches up with Stephan and begins to humiliate him. They force him strip in order to find out "whether or not he's a HE downstairs, where it really matters!'(145). They find out that, indeed, he does have a penis—and a large one at that—much to the surprise of the bigoted group. Out of anger (or jealously?), the boys throw Stephan in the river. Because he is unable to swim, he meets his death in the water. Following a laughable investigation, the teens are brought to trial and found innocent. Seeking justice, Frank gets his revenge by interrupting a press conference and publicly professes his love for Andy Harris. Andy is humiliated and gets his comeuppance. Perhaps the punishment of doubted sexuality is the worst thing that could happen to a young man like Andy.

The Drowning of Stephan Jones is filled with polemic language and has characters that are stereotypical gays. Almost every page of the book has an example of Greene's angry zeal against the religious right. For example, Andy and his father are the conservative voice in the novel and are incredible bigoted against everyone—Catholics, Jews, blacks, and gays. These people appear to be a compilation of the worst manifestations of fundamentalist thought. During

his last moments, Stephan tells his torturers that he studied to be a priest at Weston School of Theology. Andy replies, “You think that surprises me? . . . All those priests running around in their long black dresses? You think I don’t know why? ‘cause they’re all faggots—why else would they wear dresses? And that goes double for your Pope. . .Andy spat from the side of his mouth. “And that’s what I think of your Mary-worshiping fag of a pope.”(137). It is this type of polemical language that Finnesey is against when he rightly argues:

> Certainly, religion has been used to condemn, persecute, and hurt people for hundreds of thousands of years. Organized religion has caused pain to the gay community and, at some level, encourages violence against gays and lesbians. Nevertheless, I am uncomfortable with the notion that the solution to this dilemma lies in name calling, stereotyping, and persecuting the Christian Right. Greater understanding will not take place this way. Dialogue is necessary, and polarization should not occur (7-8).

Not only are the religious characters stereotypical, but the gay characters are as well. Finnessy states that his ultimate criticism of the novel, however, lies in Greene’s reinforcement of negative gay stereotypes” (5). Because they are the central gay protagonists, Stephan and Frank should be portrayed in a positive light; instead, they are only two more victims in another novel about gay persecution. Finnessy remarks: “Stephan Jones is a gay man who is physically and emotionally week, helpless, and incapable of courage. Certainly, there are gay individuals, as well as straight ones, who match Stephan’s characteristics. Yet, this image gets consistently reinforced in literature, television, and film; today, stronger, more capable gay individuals need to be presented” (6). In addition to the victimization, Greene’s characters are laden with stereotypes. The couple owns a delightful little home in an idyllic small town and own an antique

shop and are impeccable dressers, ordering their clothes from New York designers. Perhaps one of the strangest components of the couples' life is the fact that they do not own a car but a large travel trailer. What could Greene be implying by this strange prop? Certainly, if the men are affluent enough to own a home and run a successful business, they could afford a passenger car. Again, Greene is reinforcing a societal stereotype that says gay men are unable to commit to anything. She is implying that this couple doesn't want to belong in their adopted town on a permanent basis. They are outsiders, nomads, and must have a means of quick escape when life becomes difficult. Without a doubt, the combination of polemical language and abundant stereotyping makes The Drowning of Stephan of Jones a novel that falls short of its intended goals.

Rosa Guy's Ruby is another title that has a cast of gay characters that flounder with commitment. Ruby, 18, and her family, composed of Phyllisia, a younger sister, and their father Calvin Cathy are immigrants from Puerto Rico. When Ruby's mother died of breast cancer, the girls were left alone. Mr. Cathy is almost unapproachable: he is world-class curmudgeon and a workaholic. He spends most of his time at his restaurant. Phyllisia and Ruby are left to cook, clean, and take care of themselves as well as the house. As the story unfolds, we learn that Ruby is attracted to a classmate named Daphne. She is everything that Ruby feels she is not: beautiful, intelligent, and wise. The girls develop a strange relationship in which Ruby spends most of her time listening to Daphne pontificating about herself, her past, and her belief system. Also, Daphne helps Ruby with her schoolwork, which helps to bring her grades to a passing level. Although the relationship seems to be one sided, Ruby exhibits signs that she is benefiting from her time with Daphne. Their relationship grows into a sexual one. The girls spend a lot of time together but are unable to develop a relationship that can be conducted in public. When the girls

are in school, Daphne says very little to Ruby. She is very moody and sees Ruby only when she wants to. Later in the story, Daphne almost falls out of a window as she is trying to escape from Ruby's house after Mr. Cathy forbids her to be in his home. This seems to be the last straw for Daphne. She ends her contact with Ruby without an explanation. Ruby is distraught. When the young women finally do talk, Daphne says, "We have been good friends. We enjoyed each other, learned from each other. It is over. I want to live, and there is no life in clinging, pretending. We can't change each other, Bronzie [Ruby]. Our time together, all we had, is past" (212).

Following this conversation, Daphne leaves and gives the impression that she is not coming back. As the novel ends, Ruby learns that Daphne is going away to college. This news sends the young confused girl over the edge. She threatens to jump off the roof of the house but is rescued by her father. After this event, Ruby begins to heal from the painful relationship. Suddenly, Ruby becomes attracted to a neighbor named Orlando. He appears at the Cathy doorstep and wants to see Ruby. Guy writes, "Ruby looked down at her hands. Thinking of Orlando, the last time she had seen him. She remembered the admiration that had still nestled in his eyes. She put her hand up to touch her disheveled hair. 'Tell him another time.' Maybe tomorrow" (217). Does Ruby have significant feelings for Daphne? The reader is left with the impression that all of her love and attraction for Daphne didn't amount to much. She was over her in a matter of days. Another possible interpretation could be that Daphne's inability to get serious about Ruby or, at least, treat her with dignity, caused Ruby to turn away from her homosexuality and to become straight: something that she wasn't. On the other hand, Dave Webunder and Sarah Woodard argue in their article, "Homosexuality in Young Adult Fiction and Nonfiction" that this sudden change in perspective could be seen positively. They write,

"The book powerfully relates the situations, thoughts, feelings, and questions that young adults are faced with. Although one might think that it portrays young homosexuality negatively because Daphne goes straight, it addresses the fact that she had strong homosexual feelings at one point in her life and accepted those feelings" (5). Although this is appears to be a good point, it is invalid because Daphne's character is the most unrealistic in the story. Students might have a difficult time relating to her because she is so much larger than life and decidedly moody.

A redeeming quality of this novel is the fact that Ruby is very well written. Guy's language is well crafted and is full of interesting imagery. Perhaps the most beautiful description occurs when Daphne and Ruby made love for the first time:

> Love was green. Dark green, light green—the new light green of a world bursting with life. Love was blue. A pinkish blue, light blue, bright blue—midnight blue pinpointed be shimmering silver needles of flight piercing the heart. Love was orange. A blinding orange pulling the world out of darkness, tingling the air with gold, plastering the sky with multiple streaks of brilliance; orange that opened the senses into exquisite, inexpressible joy. Love was gray, dark gray, smoky smoldering gray, the gray of Daphne's eyes. Love was red, the red ceiling to floor lamp the glowed softly, guarding the curtained entrance of Daphne's room" (56).

The beautiful metaphors in the chapter are rich and textured. Additionally, Rosa uses grotesques effectively. Although an argument could be made for offering it to students because of its literary merits like these, this title should be offered judiciously.

E.M. Forster, who was posthumously "outed", wrote Maurice in 1913. The book is considered to be a classic gay novel. Forster perceptively writes in the addendum to the book's original conclusion that was added in 1960, "Since Maurice was written, there has been a change

in the public attitude here [in England]: the change from ignorance and terror to familiarity and contempt …I …had not realized that what the public really loathes in homosexuality is not the thing itself but having to think about it. If it could be slipped into our midst unnoticed, or legalized overnight by a decree in small print, there would be few protests" (255). Perhaps, Forster's suggestion hold possibilities for the high school teacher to keep in mind while he/she is making lesson plans and deciding what to include in a classroom library. Perhaps less is more. With judicious selections made by informed instructors, books with homosexual characters can combat existing stereotypes and can work as effective ambassadors to the heterosexual world. David Wilson writes in "The Open Library: YA Books for Gay Teens," "High school English teachers and librarians are aware of the important role that literature plays in the lives of students. Young people often look to books for help, support, and guidance that they find so difficult to obtain in personal relationships. When they can't talk, they often turn to books, to libraries" (60). Without a doubt, for teachers and mentors, to recognize the need for books that feature positive gay characters is of great importance in teen culture.

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