

Time to Get out of the Margins

by Tatiana Pavlides

Because the changes to my school's reading list had happened slowly, I did not notice them as they occurred; instead, I noticed them as I looked back and realized the effect these different books had on my classmates and me. As early as kindergarten, our teachers made sure that we read *And Tango Makes Three* along with classic children's books such as *Library Lion*, *Caps for Sale*, and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. What my classmates and I did not know was that, as we were discussing our stories with our classes, a number of parents were discussing Tango and his two penguin dads with our administrators. My school, I am happy to share, stood by the faculty and their commitment to the curriculum and their students. In fact, all through middle school and upper school books such as *I'll Give You the Sun*, *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, and many others were integral to bringing out voices of our LGBTQ+ classmates and to expanding everyone's perspectives in general.

At times it seems strange to me that throughout Western history there has been a poor representation of minority groups in popular media and print. Generally, mainstream media and literature completely left out minority groups, and if any did appear, they were portrayed within the context of their accepted stereotypes. If we keep presenting the same cultural stereotypes, then we will continue to teach everybody, especially our children, that only these images exist, and we deny that our society is comprised of unique individuals. We cannot allow our children to grow up with narrow and derogatory views of our world and the people in it; nor can we allow our children to grow up never having seen a truthful, sincere reflection of their own person and of their own lifestyle. It is imperative that we acknowledge the true experiences of those whose lives have been defined by cultural stereotypes. Attitudes about the historical lack of

representation of minority groups, more specifically LGBTQ+ groups, in media and print range from indifference to outrage. While some trivialize these issues and claim they are invalid, others believe that the perpetuation of unjust stereotypes and the lack of positive representation serve only to damage one's self-esteem. If one of our societal goals is to build cohesive communities in which people recognize and respect the beauty of individuality, then it is crucial that we provide our children with a truthful depiction of our diverse society. In order to achieve this goal, we must use literature and all other media to give a voice to marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community.

Just as a cisgender, heterosexual adolescent would be able to connect with and look up to characters in literature that share their own sexual and gender identification, so should LGBTQ+ youths be able to connect with positive images of their lifestyles and points of view. Thomas Page McBee, an author who identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community, acknowledges that "books were one way to sort of feel affirmed and feel like we existed" (qtd. in Ha). McBee continues to explain that it is important to see an affirming reflection of oneself in the literature and media that we are exposed to because it fosters positive self-esteem, which has been missing among many members of the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, "this general feeling of self-worth is derived from an integration of feelings, in specific self-esteem, and includes self-worth as it relates to behavior, physical appearance, intelligence, and social and emotional self" (qtd. in Ochman). Self-esteem can, therefore, be both specific and global; people can either assess all their qualities individually or synthesize them into an evaluation of themselves as a whole group (Gomillion and Giuliano). People tend to judge whether they are "good enough" by measuring themselves against societal templates (Gomillion and Giuliano). If the societal templates are exclusive and do not acknowledge the complex spectrum of individual identities, then it becomes

difficult for one to assess oneself accurately. In addition, we know that young adults are more likely to have high self-esteem if they believe they share many character traits with their role models. Those who share fewer traits, however, are more likely to suffer lower self-esteem and develop a disparaging opinion of themselves (Gomillion and Giuliano).

What happens, then, if young adults are not able to find role models that are sincere reflections of themselves? Many LGBTQ+ adolescents, for example, struggle to find positive role models since people from their community are largely underrepresented in literature and entertainment. This lack of positive and encouraging role models often means that LGBTQ+ young adults are more susceptible to self-doubt and struggle to develop positive self-identification and strong self-worth. If cisgender, heterosexual young adults are able to make positive connections with the characters and the themes they read about, then we must push popular narrative to include LGBTQ+ stories and characters as well so all young adults are able to identify with positive characters that may help them develop strong self-esteem.

Beyond a weak sense of self, LGBTQ+ adolescents experience higher rates of mental health disorders than their heterosexual and/or cisgender counterparts (McDonald). In a literature review, Kari McDonald found that the lack of social support and recognition directly relates to higher levels of depression, anxiety, alcohol or drug misuse, risky sexual behaviors, shame, and low self-esteem (McDonald). In order to help this community, it is crucial that as a society we continue to recognize them and even strengthen their presence within our mainstream culture. We need to provide these LGBTQ+ adolescents with positive role models whose stories they can connect with in order to show them that they are not alone in what they are experiencing and feeling.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the acronym LGBTQ+ represents a group composed of a unique blend of individuals, all with their own concerns and health issues, and that the small genre of LGBTQ+ literature does not nearly cover the many individuals that are overlooked and marginalized within this larger community. As a society, we have a responsibility to members of all groups to present as many experiences and voices as we can into our mainstream culture because they are a part of our community and deserve the same recognition that their heterosexual and/or cisgender counterparts receive. By expanding this genre, we can promote a feeling of belonging and show that all individuals are valued in our society.

Equally important, we need to address the fact that the proliferation of LGBTQ+ stories in mainstream literature has not affected individual identities equally (Ha). Most stories focus on cisgender, white gay men (Ha). Some people even believe that stories by other queer and gender non-conforming people have become collateral damage, as indie outlets for gay stories dry up (Ha). Thomas Page McBee states, “just like everything else, politically, certain stories are told first, or are deemed more accessible, more palatable. It’s that demographic thing, that the closer something is to the dominant demographic, the more understandable it is.” (qtd. in Ha). While we have made progress to include some of the “accessible” LGBTQ+ identities in literature, there is still work that needs to be done towards a more proportionate inclusion of all people in this community. But how can we go about this change?

In his article "Why We Need More Children's Book with LGBT Families," author Mark Loewen suggests ways to include the LGBTQ+ community in our literature. Loewen discusses why he believes that this literature should address everyday topics in order to show that being LGBTQ+ does not need to become the main issue of every story as this will reinforce

stereotyping and further marginalization of that community. Using the label “non-traditional families” for this literature perpetuates the prejudiced stereotypes surrounding LGBTQ+ families. Loewen notes that many books with LGBTQ+ families are topic-driven, and rather than just telling a story, they attempt to deal with a specific moral issue. While Loewen goes on to say that there is nothing wrong with these books, he emphasizes that this moralistic approach is one reason many non-LGBTQ+ families are not reading these books to their kids. He stresses that we do not need to make this literature controversial; instead, we need books that include LGBTQ+ families as common, everyday members of a community and do not separate “traditional” from “nontraditional” families because our society must evolve past these divisive and archaic terms. If we allow this genre to become less controversial, it can promote realistic representations of the LGBTQ+ community because they too are everyday people in our society.

At the same time, young adults who do not identify as LGBTQ+ will also benefit from having access to LGBTQ+ literature. As literature increasingly presents LGBTQ+ characters the same as it presents all other characters, the stories will serve to inform readers about the LGBTQ+ community. According to Lauren Guy, “heterosexual audiences may avoid what is considered ‘gay literature,’ thinking that it isn’t relevant to their lives. However, if straight people don’t read books that they consider to be ‘gay literature,’ then surely ‘straight literature’ also doesn’t appeal to a gay readership” (Guy). She goes on to say that the whole purpose of fiction is to show readers other people’s experiences and points of view. We do not want to read about someone exactly similar to ourselves, but instead, we like to read about people who are different from us (Guy). Furthermore, Guy states that literature can teach us about empathy when she writes, “literary fiction in which the psychology of the characters is a focal point does produce readers who are better able to detect and interpret the emotions of others” (Guy). One

would hope then that reading about the experiences and lives of LGBTQ+ characters would, in Cunningham's words, make readers "less likely to be homophobic" (qtd. in Guy). If we are able to promote more empathy and compassion through literature, then perhaps we can resolve some of the ignorance and naiveté that exists in our society surrounding this community.

Gaining empathy is also important for young adult readers who do not identify as LGBTQ+ because it might be able to help fight against bullying that many LGBTQ+ youths face. According to the 2015 National School Climate Survey report by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) on school climate, approximately 85% of LGBTQ+ adolescents have experienced verbal abuse, 27% endured physically harassment, and 13% faced physically assault while in high school (McDonald). Of those assaults or instances of bullying, almost 58% of the victims did not discuss the incident with school officials because they felt that no one would intervene on their behalf; in fact, 64% of the victims who did report the assault were ignored (McDonald). Normalizing LGBTQ+ identities through literature can help put an end to the ignorance that causes much of the bullying and assault that these students face each day.

Ultimately, the lack of LGBTQ+ literature is detrimental not only to the individuals within a community but also to our whole society. Reading forms an integral part of so many of our lives, and there is so much that one can learn from a good book. Through literature, we can see our experiences reflected back to us, discover more about ourselves, develop self-esteem, and learn compassion and empathy. It is incumbent upon each of us to seek out the most remarkable books we can find that will help educate and challenge us to recognize the importance of each individual member of our society.

Admittedly, embracing inclusive literature is just one step we need to take within a holistic matrix of approaches to debunk of LGBTQ+ stereotypes and pushing the boundaries of social norms that keep minority groups marginalized. After all, our society has many facets that literature does not always reflect. Nevertheless, exposing young readers to literature that accepts and normalizes a spectrum of gender identities will make a huge impact on meeting this challenge in the next generation. And I actually came to this conclusion through personal experience.

Earlier, I shared a story about my school, and I would like to end by sharing my experiences from my commencement. At my all-girl school, traditionally, the graduates have worn long white dresses and nude shoes. In the past few years, however, students have requested a number of changes in the criteria for acceptable attire. First, the Class of 2016 requested more options for shoe colors, pointing out to the faculty that the “nude” color did not reflect every student’s skin tone. Next, the Class of 2017 brought to the faculty’s attention that not all students felt comfortable wearing a long dress. Since the school has more recently brought in classes with diversity beyond race, religion, and basic American culture, our teachers and administration realized that the students within the LGBTQ+ community also deserved recognition and support during their graduation; therefore, they agreed to allow students to wear formal, white clothing other than dresses. These changes that at first seem minor or even superficial, made a deep impact on my graduating class. Just as my classmate Leo was allowed to dress in a way that stayed true to their gender non-conforming identity, so too was my cisgender, extremely tall friend also able to wear a pantsuit that made her feel much more comfortable. Both people who identify as LGBTQ+ and those who do not deserve to feel that they belong and are safe within our community. We can also achieve these goals within our society by being more accepting of

others and less vulnerable to divisive stereotypes. If we continue to be vigilant and open to different perspectives, we can truly make a substantial difference not only for members of the LGBTQ+ community but also in our society as a whole. Introducing children to this open perspective through appropriate literature is simply the logical place to start.

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get out of sth definition: 1. to avoid doing something that you do not want to do, especially by giving an excuse: 2. to give up. Learn more. Meaning of get out of sth in English. get out of sth. phrasal verb with get verb. uk. I have exaggerated the margin in this example. Default browser margin on h1-tag is somewhat smaller, and in my case I use Twitter Bootstrap, with Normalizer.css which sets default margin to 10px. Not that important, main point is; I can not, should not, want not change the margin on the h1-tag. I guess it is similar to my other question; Why does this CSS margin-top style not work?. Question is how do I solve this specific issue? I have read a few threads on similar problems, but haven't found any real answers and solutions. This is also true for parent-child elements. All the answers include one of the possible solutions: There are other situations where elements do not have their margins collapsed: floated elements. absolutely positioned elements. inline-block elements.