

LGBT Materials and Collection Development: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Libraries Unlimited Professional Development Network, 2016

1. Introduction

Over the last several decades LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) issues have been in the forefront of American culture and politics. Between the 2010 repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, tragic news of young LGBT kids being bullied to the point of suicide, and court cases raging away over same-sex marriage, these issues have become all but impossible to ignore. Why, then, are public libraries so often lagging when it comes to collection development of LGBT materials? As the gatekeepers to information and front-line workers supporting democracy, how is it that we are allowing this obvious inequity to happen? To say that such actions go against the American Library Association (ALA)'s Bill of Rights would be a sweeping understatement (1, 2). It would be overly simplistic to write the issue off as plain and simple homophobia. Like any thorny issue, this one is multilayered and complex – but ultimately, with dedication, professionalism, and honesty – solvable.

2. The Good

In library-land, there exist some shining examples of superb LGBT library collections. New York Public Library proudly hosts a comprehensive manuscript and archive collection of LGBT materials, and their new LGBT@NYPL webpage is home to blog channels, audio and video resources, digital projects, and print collections. This resource is available partly online and partially within the library (3).

Similarly, San Francisco Public Library's third floor houses the James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center. This beautiful and dynamic collection includes an abundance of materials documenting LGBT history, particularly that of San Francisco's Bay Area. In addition to periodicals, books, and archive collections, the center offers a series of ever-changing exhibitions and public programs, as well as regularly-scheduled meditation groups designed for the LGBT community. The center may also be used for research purposes, as it houses information on LGBT demographics, book lists, and a wealth of information for LGBT teens (4).

Of course, New York and San Francisco are large, diverse, urban areas. Many people live there – and many more do not. What are all those folks who live elsewhere to do? The good news here is that LGBT issues are big news these days, as is the fight against bullying, which affects LGBT kids in astounding and heartbreaking numbers. The cultural climate is changing, and when that happens, library collections must change along with the times.

Court cases involving same-sex marriage abound. As of this writing, over 30 states and the District of Columbia have given gay marriage the legal go-ahead (5). The battles are raging on, but public opinion is changing. The Pew Research Center reports that the rate of people supporting the legalization of same-sex marriage has risen from 35 to 52 percent since 2001, while those in opposition have fallen from 57 to 40 percent. We live in an exciting time in LGBT history. For the first time in the country's history, the majority of Americans now support gay marriage (6). In light of these positive changes, it's hard to believe that just fifty years ago, the few books that could be found in public libraries on LGBT issues tended to be skewed dramatically toward presenting the "condition" as either medical or psychological – dangerous perversions to be repressed if not outright obliterated (7).

Bullying of LGBT teens is also a hot, though terribly sad, topic. The Centers for Disease Control report significantly higher levels of violence (which includes harassment and physical assault), and suicide-related behaviors among LGBT teens than their straight peers. Over 61 percent of LGBT teens report feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in their usual surroundings. All this results in LGBT teens disproportionately experiencing depression and engaging in substance abuse and truancy, as well as engaging in risky sexual behaviors all too often resulting in HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. Between the physical health concerns and the psychological ramifications, it is no exaggeration to say that bullying of LGBT teens is dangerous and horrific at best, tragic and deadly at worst (8).

Public libraries can be of great help for young people struggling with feeling different. *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living*, written by Dan Savage and edited by Terry Miller (part of the well-known It Gets Better project), is chock-full of true inspirational and uplifting stories written by LGBT adults for the younger generation. David Leviathan's newest young adult novel, *Two Boys Kissing*, is, in turns, sweet, sad, scary, and funny – all the qualities that make for good YA fiction. These are just two examples. There are many more, and finding them can feel like an exciting search for lost treasure. Happy hunting!

3. ***The Bad***

A vignette to consider: A skilled and dedicated young librarian lands his first job at a public library. He is excited to get started with collection development, hoping to beef up his library's small, outdated LGBT collection. He's done his homework, so he knows to search outside the standard book review sources and lists of suggested purchases sent by the library's book vendor. He consults the Lambda Literary Foundation's reviews (9), and the ALA's GLBTRT Round Table professional tools website (10). He compiles a list of LGBT-themed fiction and nonfiction titles for both teens and adults, and brings it to his supervisor. The response he receives is dismaying. It seems a recent community assessment conducted by the library revealed that roughly 70 percent of the community is made up of married, heterosexual couples with young children. The supervisor advises the new librarian to focus on the needs and desires of this group. A couple of members of the library board, she adds, are quite conservative in their views, and we don't want to ruffle any feathers, do we, so soon after being hired?

What to do? The librarian has his orders, and the supervisor has her reasons. Seventy percent of the community is quite a large amount of people. These young, straight parents tend to be visible and vocal. They attend the library's storytimes with their kids, they check out books on financial planning, parenting, and current events, as well as popular novels, DVDs, and music CDs. They borrow audiobooks for entertainment on their commutes to and from work. They support the library's fundraising efforts. Some are members of the Friends of the Library.

Still, while 70 percent is a substantial number, what about those remaining 30 percent? Who are they? Perhaps some are seniors and college students; perhaps some are childfree folks, both attached and single; perhaps some are gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, as well as transgender men and women. Most likely, they're a mishmash of all those who simply don't fit neatly into any survey-designed category. If they're less likely to use the library than the seventy percent majority, it seems reasonable to ask why this is so. Do they feel that the collection does not meet their wants and needs? Have they made a trip to the library only to leave disappointed? And, most importantly, were these questions included on the community assessment, and was the assessment tool aimed at the entire community, perhaps through a mailing or phone survey? If it was only directed at those who have active library card accounts or who use the library's website, then it's a flawed tool and will provide skewed results. A quality community assessment addresses both those who use the library and those who don't. It does not ignore those who have chosen not to use the library – rather, it is designed, in part, to find out why (11).

Clearly, there is a danger in the over-reliance on community assessments. While they are significant, necessary tools that help us understand a community's mainstream majority

and allow us to serve that demographic as best as possible, the trouble comes when we focus exclusively on the majority at the peril of the remainder.

Current research indicates that between three and ten percent of the US population is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (12, 13, 14). To put this in perspective, twelve percent of women in the US will be diagnosed with breast cancer at some point in their lives (15). Eight percent of the US population has diabetes (16). Only 2.6 percent of American adults will be diagnosed with bipolar disorder in any given year (17). People with diabetes, breast cancer and bipolar disorder are not necessarily members of special interest groups. They are simply people living their lives with a difference that separates them in one way from the mainstream.

Should a public library refuse to provide adequate and up-to-date materials on breast cancer, diabetes, and bipolar disorder? According to cold, hard statistics, one might be inclined to say perhaps so. After all, the numbers do not indicate that people living with these conditions make up anything close to the majority. Still, imagine learning that you or a loved one has been diagnosed with one of these conditions. Would you hope to find valuable information at your public library? How would you feel if there were no books on the subject because most people – the vast majority, in fact – have not had to deal with your important concern? How would you feel if there were a few books, but the most recent one in the collection was published in 1994? And how would you feel if you looked through that yellowed old book and discovered that the author felt the condition should be fought, quelled, or even reversed through extensive aversion therapy?

Back, then, to our rookie librarian and the issue of what he might say to his supervisor and the library board about his desire to strengthen his library's LGBT collection. Put simply and harshly, there is no right answer. There is no perfect or even good solution to a situation as hairy as this one. Anyone who has been in this sort of position knows that going up against a library's management structure is a delicate and difficult task. If our librarian feels safe enough to do so, he might politely remind his supervisor of the ALA's code of ethics regarding censorship (18), or initiate a conversation about the importance of reaching out to those demographics who may have given up on the library after failing to find materials of interest. He might look for another job. He might tough it out and hope to slowly initiate change from within. If there were an easy answer, we would all be at ease in our jobs all the time and never have to read (or write) articles such as this one. The hard truth is that it is uncomfortable to go against the grain. It might make you an outcast, and it might even cost you your job. It should never cost you your convictions.

4. The Ugly

Considering the socially conscious nature of librarianship, it would be difficult indeed to find a librarian who would admit to engaging in self-censorship or under-the-radar discrimination. So then why are so many public libraries' LGBT collections consistently found to be lacking, and why do LGBT patrons so often report low levels of satisfaction with their communities' public libraries (19)? If we are truly doing all we can to keep our collections balanced and up-to-date, there should be no reason why LGBT materials are so sorely lacking in public libraries.

The elephant in the room is, to word it kindly, passivity. But we've come this far, so let's go ahead and word it bluntly: It is self-censorship. We can label it neglect or acquiescence, and we can even label it compliance with community assessment results. We can say we're just too busy to do any extra searching, or we can insist that we're doing our best with a tight budget. We can complain that we don't know where to look. We can assume the materials won't circulate. Whatever we call it, the truth is that this stealthy internal censorship is extremely difficult to spot and identify. The enemy is us, and we are both subtle and insidious. We self-censor without making a sound, without throwing books on a bonfire. We're just ordering and weeding. Self-censorship is not even an action, but a lack of action. It's not measurable, and its nature is to be furtive and undetectable. Why should a librarian bother with a loud proclamation to staff and patrons that LGBT-themed books make her uncomfortable and that she has willfully chosen not order them when it's so much easier to quietly skip over LGBT books when placing an order? The former probably almost never happens. The latter happens all the time.

In addition to taking a passive role in ordering and weeding, we practice self-censorship when we choose to sequester LGBT books in a "special collection" area from which a patron (or a patron's parent) must specifically ask the library staff for the book. This is often done as a precaution against challenges or as a compromise when a book actually is challenged. Perhaps it makes librarians, board members, and some community members more comfortable, keeping those naughty books out of the hands of innocents, but barriers create a feeling of restriction, and restriction is the antithesis of access, that all-important tenet of librarianship (20).

Often the simplest response to a challenge, or even the perceived threat of a potential challenge, is also the most effective. Nobody is in charge of what anyone else chooses to read. If a patron doesn't like a book, she doesn't have to read it. If a young patron's parent doesn't want his child to read a book, he doesn't have to check it out and bring it home – he can just leave it on the shelf with all the others. Choosing what and what not to read is liberty. Choosing what someone else should and should not read is suppression. A parent who participates with his child in the selection of books to read is practicing sound parenting. A parent who attempts to determine what other people's children should and

should not read is practicing censorship. And a librarian who creates barriers and roadblocks between patrons and books is participating in the complete opposite of that principle upon which her profession is built— access.

When we order, when we weed, and when we create barriers, we must be on high alert to our biases. Supervisors and managers, likewise, have a duty to review the books their staff members are ordering, and to ask questions about both what is included and what is lacking. These are difficult conversations, to be sure. Indeed, simply thinking about our prejudices is a dreadfully uncomfortable mental task. But we must talk and we must think about these thorny issues. It is our professional obligation, and it is essential to good librarianship.

5. Conclusion

We all have biases. To deny this brings about more harm than good. Our prejudices might be easy or difficult to admit to, depending on the individual and the particular bias. While it is certainly not advisable to stand on a street corner and loudly confess to homophobia (really, please don't do this), it does seem reasonable to spend some time participating in quiet reflection, reading, and soul-searching. Our prejudices are often long-standing and deeply-held. We rarely dare to question them with honesty and open-mindedness, because to do so is terribly uncomfortable.

Whatever the result, this is not a how-to manual on LGBT acceptance. If you think clearly about your biases and still come out holding strong to them, that's fine. But here's the rub: Whatever you decide is right and correct for yourself is not necessarily right and correct for your public. Let's be honest – we all buy books for our libraries that we don't plan to read or that we find unsavory. We all have authors and even topics that make us cringe. But we buy them anyway, because it is not our job to determine what other people read, believe, or think.

When we refuse, subtly or openly, to purchase LGBT materials, we are actively doing harm. Not only is this practice blatantly professionally unethical, it is also a deliberate choice to place personal beliefs or fears over professional responsibilities. It is the opposite of access. It is an ugly word representing an ugly action. It is the thing we claim never to do as librarians. It goes against our professional guidelines and our reasons for doing what we do. In a word, a very ugly word, it is censorship.

Librarianship is a service-based profession that requires us to be honest with ourselves, even when it's uncomfortable. Creating positive change comes from within – from the everyday work of self-aware, socially-conscious librarians who want to make a difference

in their communities. With time, reflection, and professionalism, our LGBT collections will certainly grow and thrive.

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