

OUT OF THE CLOSET...BUT NOT ON THE SHELVES?

an analysis of Canadian public libraries' holdings of gay-themed picture books

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For those of you who do not want children exposed to [picture books such as Heather Has Two Mommies and Daddy's Roommate], I ask this: what leads you to believe that every child sitting in your child's classroom or library comes from a home with a mother and a father? Why do you think that there are no children in your child's classroom or library with lesbian or gay parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbors and friends? What messages are you giving to all children, when you pretend there is only one type of family, and render the rest invisible
from Lesléa Newman, "Heather' and Her Critics."
Horn Book Magazine 73.2(1997): 149-154.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, it would appear, superficially at least, that gay culture is gaining increased acceptance in North American society. Television shows, movies, and magazines feature openly "out" gay characters or personalities. Canada and the state of Massachusetts have recently recognized the legality of gay marriage. In recent decades, LGBT (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender)-related fiction and informational books for adults and young adults have also become more numerous. A relatively new category of gay-themed material consists of picture books written for preschool and elementary school children. These books frequently normalize gay and lesbian relationships by presenting positive depictions of same-sex partners and their children. As Spence¹ notes, these homo-positive picture books are a significant resource for families in which children are raised by LGBT parents as well as for all families wishing to teach their children understanding and acceptance of diverse lifestyles. Evaluating public library collections for the inclusion of gay-themed picture books provides a means of assessing how well libraries are

servicing the needs of both these user groups. This study aims to provide an impetus to librarians to ensure that the needs of these groups are met and that bias does not influence selectors to under-represent or exclude picture books with gay content.

The purpose of this study is to analyze selected Canadian public libraries' holdings of picture books with gay and/or lesbian content published between 1989 (the publication date of Lesléa Newman's pioneering picture book *Heather Has Two Mommies*) and 2002 in order to measure access to such books and to determine whether any evidence of bias on the part of selectors exists. For the purposes of this study, a picture book is defined as a highly illustrated book in which the illustration is an integral component of the story or message. Books appropriate for children from preschool to elementary school are included. In terms of content, all English-language picture books featuring either implicitly or explicitly gay or lesbian characters in either central or supporting roles are included in the study.²

The study answers the following questions:

1. What English-language picture book titles published between 1989 and 2002 can be identified as having lesbian and/or gay content?
2. How many reviews in total for each title are listed in *Book Review Index*?
3. How many copies of each identified title are held in the Vancouver, Victoria, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, and Halifax public libraries?
4. Does the frequency of reviews alone account for the likelihood of the selection of gay-themed picture books by the libraries?

Methodology

The first task was the identification of picture book titles with gay or lesbian content published between 1989 and 2002. Google and AltaVista were used to search the web using combinations of the search terms "gay," "lesbian," "picture books," "juvenile fiction," "booklist," and "library." This search strategy generated dozens of library and non-library booklists on gay and lesbian topics. Amazon.com was also used to generate lists of titles related to titles

previously identified, and the booklists created by amazon.com users were searched. These lists were merely a starting point for identifying titles; no authority was attributed to them. Titles with publication dates of 1988 or earlier were eliminated from the lists, when publication dates could be determined. Titles were also taken from Day's bibliography³ and from Spence's list.

Next, each title was searched in *Book Review Index* (BRI) database available through Dialog. If no reviews for a title were found in BRI, that title was eliminated from the study. If the book was published in that period and not reviewed, it was not reasonable to expect any libraries to have purchased it. Thus Lois Abramchik's *Is Your Family Like Mine?* (1993), Sarita Johnson-Calvo's *A Beach-Party with Alexis* (1993), Jeanne Arnold's *Amy Asks A Question* (1996), Eric Hoffman's *Best Best Colors* (1999), and Bobbie Combs' *1-2-3 Family Counting Book* (2000) and *A-B-C Family Alphabet Book* (2001) were all eliminated from the study.

It was then important to verify that the titles were picture books and that they had gay and/or lesbian content. To verify the content of the books, reviews of the books appearing in *Booklist* or *Publisher's Weekly* and information about the books available on amazon.com were consulted. *Caleb's Friend* by Eric Nones was eliminated because no available review or summary information identified any gay or lesbian content. Through this process, 30 picture book titles with gay and/or lesbian content published between 1989 and 2002 were identified. These titles are listed in the "Results and Discussion" section which follows. Next a list of control titles was created. For each gay-themed picture book reviewed in *Booklist*, a picture book title without identified gay or lesbian content reviewed in the same section of *Booklist* or *Horn Book Magazine* was selected. The random selection was performed by assigning each title in the review section a number and randomly selecting a number using randomizer.org. The control list (see Appendix on page 75) amounted to 22 titles.

Finally, data was collected from the web-based catalogues of the selected libraries and the number of copies in each library (for both gay-themed and control titles) was recorded. Lost, withdrawn, trace, on order, and large print books did count toward the number of copies held, because they did indicate that the library purchased

the copy, although we did not know the policies of each library involved regarding the replacement of lost or withdrawn copies. Audio books, talking books, and French translations did not count toward the total number of copies held, with the exception of *Red Ribbon* by Sarah Weeks, which exists as a book and accompanying song recording on audiocassette.

Results and Discussion

The results have been organized under four headings: publishing output, review data, library holdings, and library rankings.

Publishing Output — This study identified 30 gay-themed picture books published in a thirteen-year period (1989-2002), or an average of only 2.3 titles per year. No gay-themed picture books were identified as being published in 1997, 1999, or 2000, but for most of the early 1990s, three gay-themed picture books a year were published with a modest peak occurring in 1991, with the publication of five such books.⁴ A slow decline in publication output can be noted in the years since 1997. In contrast, Boon and Howard⁵ identified an average of 7 young adult (YA) novels with LGBT content being published per year between 1998 and 2002 and Jenkins⁶ counted 38 YA titles in the previous five-year period (1993-1997), or 7.6 titles per year. Clearly, there is a relative lack of output of picture books with lesbian and/or gay content and this output appears to be on the decline as we enter the twenty-first century. Another trend, and perhaps a more positive one, is that more publishers are now producing gay-themed picture books. Whereas Alyson Press virtually monopolized this publishing output in the early nineties, there now appears to be a greater diversity of publishers, including major mainstream publishing houses, occasionally producing gay-themed picture books.

The list of titles follows, grouped by year.

1989

Newman, Lesléa. *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Alyson Press.

1990

Elwin, Rosamund. *Asha's Mums*. Women's Press.

Jeness, Aylette. *Families: A Celebration of Diversity, Commitment and Love*.

- Houghton Mifflin.
- Willhoite, Michael. *Daddy's Roommate*. Alyson Press.
- 1991
- Brown, Forman. *The Generous Jefferson Bartleby Jones*. Alyson Press.
 Heron, Ann. *How Would You Feel If Your Dad Was Gay?* Alyson Press.
 Newman, Lesléa. *Belinda's Bouquet*. Alyson Press.
 Newman, Lesléa. *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*. Alyson Press.
 Valentine, Johnny. *The Duke who Outlawed Jelly Beans and other stories*. Alyson Press.
- 1992
- Alden, Joan. *A Boy's Best Friend*. Alyson Press.
 Valentine, Johnny. *The Daddy Machine*. Alyson Press.
 Valentine, Johnny. *The Day They Put a Tax on Rainbows, and other stories*. Alyson Press.
- 1993
- Jordan, Mary Kate. *Losing Uncle Tim*. Albert Whitman.
 Newman, Lesléa. *Saturday is Pattyday*. New Victoria.
 Valentine, Johnny. *Two Moms, the Zark, and Me*. Alyson Press.
 Willhoite, Michael. *Uncle What-is-it is Coming to Visit!* Alyson Press.
- 1994
- Quinlan, Patricia. *Tiger Flowers*. Dial.
 Valentine, Johnny. *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dads, Blue Dads*. Alyson Press.
 Wickens, Elaine. *Anna Day and the O-Ring*. Alyson Press.
- 1995
- Newman, Lesléa. *Too Far Away to Touch*. Clarion Books.
 Vigna, Judith. *My Two Uncles*. Albert Whitman.
 Weeks, Sarah. *Red Ribbon*. Harper Collins.
- 1996
- Greenberg, Keith. *Zack's Story: Growing Up With Same-Sex Parents*. Lerner
 Willhoite, Michael. *Daddy's Wedding*. Alyson Press.
- 1998
- Kennedy, Joseph. *Lucy Goes to the Country*. Alyson Press.
 Skutch, Robert. *Who's in Family*. Tricycle Press.
- 2001
- Parr, Todd. *It's Okay to be Different*. Megan Tingley.
- 2002
- Haan, Linda de. *King & King*. Tricycle Press.
 Fierstein, Harvey. *The Sissy Duckling*. Simon and Schuster.
 Newman, Lesléa. *Felicia's Favorite Story*. Two Lives Publishing.

Three gay-themed picture books have been published very recently: one in 2003 and two more in 2004. However, these titles are apparently still unreviewed (according to BRI) and do not appear in any of the library catalogues examined. Therefore, they were not

included in this study, although the titles are listed below.

Aldrich, Andrew. *How My Family Came To Be: Daddy, Papa and Me.* (New Family Press, 2003)

Garden, Nancy. *Molly's Family.* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004)

Haan, Linda de. *King & King & Family.* (Tricycle Press, 2004)

Review Data — Picture book titles with gay content receive, on average, significantly fewer reviews than a control group of non-gay-themed picture book titles—30% fewer reviews, in fact. The gay-themed picture books averaged 6.4 reviews per title, with a range of 1 to 18 reviews, whereas the control group averaged 9.14 reviews per title, with a range of 4 to 30 reviews. Although previous studies have shown that titles with gay content, when they are reviewed, tend to receive positive reviews^{7,8} the data from this study suggest that gay-themed titles are less likely to be reviewed than titles without gay or lesbian content. If libraries undercollect in the area of gay-themed picture books, the comparative lack of reviews must be taken into account. Furthermore, as Spence notes, many of the reviews of gay-themed picture books are to be found in sources such as *Lambda Book Report*, *The Advocate*, and *The Bloomsbury Review*, none of which are core collection development review sources for most children's librarians. He concludes, "The librarian with a concern for collections in a specialized area will probably, then, have to work a bit more diligently to determine what suitable titles are available." (358)

The correlation between number of reviews and number of copies in libraries, however, is by no means clear. For example, in the gay-themed group, five books received between 8 and 11 reviews each, but the total number of holdings for each book was, variously, 1, 4, 13, 61, and 80. In the control group, one book receiving 9 reviews had a total of 23 copies in the nine libraries, whereas another book receiving the same number of reviews had 73 copies in the libraries studied. Quantity of reviews alone seems unlikely to define the likelihood of purchase by libraries. Other variables affecting sales to libraries may include:

- other marketing efforts by publishers
- buzz or lack of buzz around a title
- attractiveness of cover art

- content of the review
- content or perceived content of the book
- price
- discussion of a title on librarian listserves and similar “grapevine” activity

As Spence notes, “In Canada, a recent school challenge in the Vancouver suburb of Surrey over the titles *Asha’s Mums*, *Belinda’s Bouquet*, and *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dads, Blue Dads* led to a provincial Supreme Court decision rejecting the book ban.” (355). Similarly, *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy’s Roommate* are both high on the ALA’s list of most frequently challenged books. In this study, four of these five challenged titles are at or above the average in terms of number of Canadian libraries holding copies.

Another trend in Canadian public libraries’ holdings of gay-themed picture books is a preference for books in which a child protagonist comes to terms with the illness or death of an adult character from AIDS. MaryKate Jordan’s *Losing Uncle Tim*, Lesléa Newman’s *Too Far Away To Touch*, and Patricia Quinlan’s *Tiger Flowers* all explore this theme and all three are near the top of the rankings for total overall holdings and for total numbers of reviews. These books are, in reality, more about the acceptance of death than the acceptance of a gay lifestyle.

The data also demonstrate, in both the gay-themed and control lists, a predictable bias toward Canadian authors, regardless of content. *Asha’s Mums*, with 7 reviews, has 50 copies in the libraries studied (in contrast with Ann Heron’s *How Would You Feel If Your Dad Was Gay?*, which has only 17 copies with the same number of reviews).

Table 1: The relationship between number of reviews and library holdings

TITLE	# of REVIEWS	# of COPIES
The Sissy Duckling	11	80
Tiger Flowers	15	78
Daddy’s Roommate	18	66
Heather Has Two Mommies	10	61
Asha’s Mums	7	50

Too Far Away To Touch	13	48
Losing Uncle Tim	6	38
Who's in a Family	5	33
My Two Uncles	7	33
It's Okay to be Different	4	29
Families: A Celebration of...	13	28
King & King	4	26
Daddy's Wedding	6	24
One Dad, Two Dads, Brown...	3	22
Zack's Story	3	21
How Would You Feel...Gay?	7	17
Uncle What-is-it is...Visit!	8	13
Lucy Goes to the Country	3	11
Saturday is Pattyday	5	8
Red Ribbon	8	3
Felicia's Favorite Story	1	7
The Day They Put a Tax on...	2	7
Anna Day and the O-Ring	2	7
A Boy's Best Friend	4	4
The Duke Who Outlawed...	10	4
The Generous Jefferson B...	2	3
Gloria Goes to Gay Pride	3	3
Belinda's Bouquet	4	2
The Daddy Machine	2	2
Two Moms, the Zark & Me	8	1
AVERAGE	6.4	24.5

Library Holdings — As with the data on number of reviews, it is the averages that speak most strongly: the average number of copies held in all nine libraries was 24.5 for the gay-themed picture books (with a range from 1 to 80 copies) and 60.5 for the control titles (with a range from 16 to 172 copies). Randomly-selected titles are held in much greater quantities than gay-themed titles. A copy of a randomly-selected title without gay or lesbian content was approximately 60% more likely to be purchased by these libraries than a copy of a title with gay or lesbian content and it is unclear whether this difference in holdings can be explained by the increased frequency of reviews alone. See Appendix for a complete list of control titles, number of reviews, and holdings.

Library Rankings — The following table records the percentage of titles on each list of which the library holds one or more copies.

Table 2: Comparison of holdings in Canadian Public Libraries

Column A = % of Control Titles Held
 B = Copies of Control Titles Held
 C = % of Gay-Themed Titles Held
 D = Copies of Gay-Themed Titles Held
 E = Ranking in Control Holdings
 F = Ranking in Gay-Themed Holdings
 G = Spence (2000) Ranking

Library	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Vancouver	91	101	80	162	3	2	2
Victoria	91	17	50	39	3	3	5
Edmonton	82	96	37	32	7	9	8
Regina	59	79	43	42	9	5	3
Saskatoon	95	112	43	62	2	5	1
Winnipeg	82	154	43	20	7	5	9
Toronto	100	435	83	247	1	1	4
Ottawa	91	168	40	83	3	8	6
Halifax	91	108	50	47	3	3	6
Average	86.9%	60.5	52%	24.5			

This comparison proves the importance of using a control group when examining collections for possible bias. Sheer quantity is not enough of an indicator. A low percentage of gay-themed titles is not an indication of possible bias when the library holds approximately the same percentage of the control titles. Regina, although it only has 43% of the gay-themed picture books in its collection, also has a relatively low percentage of control titles. It is thus likely that Regina does not demonstrate a bias against gay-themed titles, but likely has less purchasing power or seeks less variety in its purchasing than most of the other libraries studied. Winnipeg, on the other hand, manages to collect 82% (and 154 copies) of the control titles, but only 43% (and 20 copies) of the gay-themed titles, a significant difference.

Another observation of interest is the fact that two libraries (Vancouver and Victoria) actually have more overall copies of gay-themed picture books than of control titles, although the percentage of individual control titles is higher. This is explained in two ways. The Victoria Public Library has very few multiple copies of control titles, but it has a broad range of these titles in its collection. The Vancouver Public Library, in contrast, has a high number of multiple copies of some individual titles of gay-themed picture books. For example, 22 copies of *Heather Has Two Mommies*, 20 copies of *Daddy's Roommate*, and 15 copies of *Asha's Mums* are listed in the Vancouver Public Library online catalogue, but no copies whatsoever of 6 gay-themed titles and only 1-3 copies of 12 others are listed, indicating possible lack of balance in its collection.

The changes in rankings since Spence's 2000 study are interesting to observe for the libraries involved, but no meaning can be attributed to these rankings without a great deal of comparative data, such as budgets, staff size, collection policies, city population, and demographic attributes of the city population.

An interesting comparison with the results of this investigation can be made with the recent parallel study conducted by Boon and Howard, which investigated holdings of LGBT-themed YA fiction at the same nine Canadian libraries. This study also concluded that LGBT-themed YA fiction receives fewer reviews and is less likely to be collected than a randomly selected control group of titles. However, a comparison of these two studies (summarized in Table 3 below) demonstrates that although gay-themed books for youth appear less often in review sources and in library collections than a control group of titles, picture books fare significantly worse than YA fiction in both quantity of reviews, total number of copies, and percentage of checklist titles collected.

Table 3: A Comparison of Reviews and Library Holdings of Gay-Related Picture Books and LGBT-Related YA Fiction

Column A = Gay-Related Picture Books
B = Picture Book Control Group
C = LGBT-Related YA Fiction
D = YA Fiction Control Group

	A	B	C	D
Number of Reviews	6.4	9.14	8.125	13.9
Library Holdings copies per title	24.5	60.5	39.83	68.14
Percentage of Checklist Titles	52%	86.9%	73.47%	80.94%

Table 4 summarizes the relative ranking of the libraries in their holdings of gay-themed YA fiction and gay-themed picture books.

Table 4: A Comparison of Canadian Public Libraries Holdings of Gay-Related YA Fiction and Gay-Related Picture Books

A = Ranking in Gay-Related YA Fiction Holdings
B = Ranking in Gay-Related Picture Bk Holdings

Library	A	B
Vancouver	1	2
Victoria	9	3
Edmonton	1	9
Regina	7	5
Saskatoon	4	5
Winnipeg	7	5
Toronto	3	1
Ottawa	5	8
Halifax	6	3

While some libraries are rather consistent in their rankings in these two studies, other libraries demonstrate some surprising differences. The Victoria Public Library came out at the bottom of the rankings for its collection of LGBT-related YA fiction, but fared much better in its collection of gay-themed picture books. In contrast, the Edmonton Public Library came out at the top of the rankings for its collection of LGBT-related YA fiction, but dropped to the bottom of the list for its collection of picture books with lesbian or

gay content. Further investigation is clearly needed to explain these apparent inconsistencies in collection practices.

The averages again demonstrate that gay-themed picture books are less likely to be collected than a randomly-selected control group of titles, with the nine libraries holding on average 86.9% of the control titles but only 52% of the gay-themed titles. Furthermore, the data show that access to picture books with lesbian or gay content differs considerably depending on location; children and families ought to have equitable access to such fiction regardless of whether they live in Victoria or Vancouver, Ottawa or Halifax. Clearly, the public libraries of Vancouver and Toronto far outstrip the collection of gay-themed picture books at other libraries studied in terms of both percentage and number of checklist titles held. These two libraries serve the two largest populations of the nine libraries studied, populations which include sizeable gay and lesbian communities. Further investigation is needed to determine whether the high ranking of the Vancouver and Toronto public libraries in terms of their holdings of gay-themed picture books results from the sheer size of their user community, from the sheer size of their overall collections, or from selection librarians' perceptions of particular community need.

Conclusion

This study has found evidence of several factors which may limit access to picture books with gay or lesbian content in public libraries. The study identifies 30 English-language titles published between 1989 and 2002. These titles attracted on average 6.4 reviews per title, as compared to an average of 9.14 reviews for a randomly-selected control group of non-gay-themed picture book titles. The reasons for this comparative lack of reviews are unclear; bias on the part of review periodicals or inadequate marketing by publishers may be factors. Furthermore, many of the reviews of gay-themed picture books are to be found in specialized sources, sources not commonly used as collection tools by public librarians working with children and youth. This relative lack of reviews in mainstream reviewing sources may be sufficient to explain at least some of the differences in library holdings between the gay-themed group of titles and the control group. On average, in the nine Canadian public libraries studied, 24.5 copies of each gay-themed

title were held, as compared to 60.5 copies of each control title, a significant difference in the collection and availability of these titles. In terms of the availability of a single copy of each title at the libraries in question, the two groups of titles are still far apart, with the libraries on average holding 86.9% of the control titles and only 52% of the gay-themed titles. Without further analysis, it is unclear whether this difference constitutes evidence of significant bias or self-censorship on the part of selectors in general. However, the data do show that certain libraries are significantly more likely to purchase the control titles than the gay-themed titles, and that access to these titles varies according to one's location in Canada. This trend is disturbing, particularly since children are frequently more dependent upon libraries for their reading material than are other user groups. If a library fails to acquire a gay-themed book intended for an adult or teen reader, adults and teens can find the book elsewhere, probably in a bookstore or through inter-library loan. The same is not so for children. Further research is definitely needed into the marketing practices of publishers of gay-themed material, librarians' access to specialized reviewing journals, and librarians' perceptions of community need.

References

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2. Thus, books which explore the diversity of family structure (including same-sex unions) are included, as are books dealing with a character with AIDS, even if the sexual orientation of this character is not explicitly discussed.
3. Day, F.A. *Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults*. Greenwood, 2000.
4. It is interesting to note the dominance of the Alyson Press in the publication of gay-affirmative picture books throughout much of the early nineties. Alyson Press exclusively publishes gay and lesbian-related fiction and nonfiction, and the Alyson Wonderland imprint is devoted to the publication of homo-positive material for children and young adults.
5. Boon, M. H. & Howard, V. "Access in Selected Canadian Public Libraries to Young Adult Fiction with Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Content Published Between 1998 and 2002." *Collection Building*. (forthcoming).
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7. Sweetland, J. H., & Christensen, P. G. "Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual titles: Their Treatment in the Review Media and Their Selection by Libraries." *Collection Building*, 14(2) (1995): 32-41.

8. Rothbauer, P.M., & McKechnie, L.E.F. "The Treatment of Gay and Lesbian Fiction for Young Adults in Selected Prominent Reviewing Media" [Electronic version]. *Collection Building*, 19(1) (2000): 5-16.

APPENDIX: The relationship between number of reviews and library holdings (control titles)

TITLE	# OF REVIEWS	# OF COPIES
Horace	15	117
Slobcat	9	31
Red Day, Green Day	8	21
Into This Night We...	7	31
Birthday Blizzard	6	28
Hattie Baked a...Cake	5	30
Humphrey Thud	6	62
No Nap	8	76
What Planet Are You... Bean?	9	73
Red Hen and Sly Fox	7	59
Hello! Good-bye!	6	79
Mama Cat Has Three Kittens	10	172
Mommy's Hands	4	50
The Hen That Crowed	7	16
Amanda's Perfect Hair	6	64
Stella and Roy	12	70
Welcome Back, Sun	15	78
Swamp Angel	30	87
Outside, Inside	9	23
Little Caribou	10	53
Little Clam	9	28
Tom's Rainbow Walk	4	22
AVERAGE	9.14	60.5