Heartthrobs & Heartbreaks
A GUIDE TO YOUNG ADULT BOOKS WITH GAY THEMES

by Christine Jenkins

John Donovan’s I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip, published in 1969, was the first young adult novel to specifically address the issue of homosexuality. In the book, thirteen-year-old Davy describes his growing friendship with a classmate, Doug. One afternoon the two wrestle and end up kissing. This one kiss makes Davy feel so uncomfortable he considers ending the friendship. During a conversation in which Davy resolves never to do it (whatever “it” was) again, Davy and Doug both agree to continue being friends. Although the treatment of the sexual encounter is vague and brief, some reviewers in 1969 found the book remarkable and ground-breaking. Other reviewers worried that “it might arouse in the unconcerned unnecessary interest or alarm or both.”

Between 1969 and 1986, approximately 37 young adult novels with gay characters or themes were published in the United States. The explicit and implicit messages about homosexuality conveyed in young adult books are important to examine because reading is one of the few ways for adolescents to gather information privately about the subject.

The gay people in young adult novels confirm many of the American stereotypes of the generic gay person: a good-looking, white male in his twenties or thirties who is single, lives in a big city on the East or West Coast, and has a large disposable income. He is probably involved in some way with the arts or is an opera devotee, a classical music fan, or art appreciator. He comes from a troubled family, is sexually promiscuous, and probably has AIDS.

Another stereotype that is confirmed by these novels is that most gay people are white. Ruby (Guy, 1976) is the only book in which the main characters are black. After their brief affair they both appear to “go straight.” There are no Asian, Hispanic, or Native American gay people, and the few people of color who appear at all are minor characters.

There are also very few poor or working-class gay characters. Although some books feature low-income major characters, in only a few are those characters gay. Of these, two appear in books by David Rees, a British author published only by small presses in this country.

One of the most obvious trends in the young adult portrayal of gay people is the predominance of males. Despite increased visibility of lesbians within the gay movement, the large number of female authors of these books, and the perceived majority of female teenage readers, there are few books with lesbian themes. The lesbian characters who are portrayed fall into two groups. The first group consists of females who act to seduce an inexperienced (but usually willing) girl, only to lose interest once the conquest is made. The women

Christine Jenkins is a school librarian who has worked with children and young adults since 1976. She is also a columnist for Feminist Bookstore News.

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in the other group are also charismatic and also attempt seduction, but these attempts are unsuccessful, and are seen as aberrations rather than behavior patterns. The other books with lesbian content contain average-looking girls or women and only one of these characters creates the kind of danger to other characters that the beautiful girls or women do. The conclusion could be drawn that a lesbian can be beautiful or a lesbian can be good, but she cannot possibly be both. And, therefore, all beautiful and good females must also be heterosexual.

Gay men being particularly good-looking does not come up often in these books, although few are described as physically unattractive. The two who are, unfortunately, are both disabled, which in turn compounds the stereotype of the ugliness of the handicapped. Both characters have their appealing moments, but both are primarily withdrawn and critical, and their emotional coldness is directly attributed to their disability.

The majority of gay males are average-looking. The handsome ones are generally pleasant, and certainly not as evil as the beautiful lesbians. Two of the handsome teenagers cause some pain to others, but it is unintentional. In remarkably similar plots, both boys are loved by the books' female narrators. The boy finally comes out to the girl, and she reacts with dismay and anger. Part of the anger is directed towards the "injustice" of a gay male being so attractive but unattainable. Eventually, both relationships recover and turn into strong friendships, but the idea that good looks are wasted if the person possessing them isn't heterosexual is reinforced. The only evil gay male portrayed is the sleazy, ugly and ultimately murderous sheriff in Just the Right Amount of Wrong (Hulse, 1982) who is so homophobic he ends up killing the only other gay man in town. It is also worth noting that our society's assumptions are again mirrored in young adult fiction, as both gay and straight men are allowed more latitude than women in their appearance. Women are shown falling for gay men, but men are never shown falling for lesbians. Again, a man without a woman is attractive and valued, but a woman without a man is not.

The assumption of gay people's involvement in the arts is partially confirmed by these novels. Several books have a high school or summer stock theater setting. Almost half of the gay adults portrayed have arts-related jobs, and both adults with science-related jobs have a strong interest in the arts. The other major occupation of gay people in these books is teaching, which is especially interesting given our society's widespread fear of gay people in that field. It is unfortu-
nate that two-thirds of the teachers portrayed lose their jobs in the course of the book. There is only one teacher who keeps his job, has a long-term relationship, and is generally admired. This novel is the most recent of those including gay teachers, and offers welcome relief from the gloom and doom projected in the other books. In reality, both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers take strong positions on teachers' privacy rights; both have successfully defended teachers whose employment has been challenged on grounds of sexual preference. It is time that young adult novels reflect this reality.

Since young adult novels are about young adults, it is not surprising that most of the gay people portrayed are youthful, thereby confirming the common view of gay people as relatively young. In nearly two-thirds of the books the teenagers are the only characters who deal with gay issues. Most of the gay adults are under 60 years old. Older adults are sometimes aware and tolerant of others' homosexuality but are never shown as being gay themselves. Given the societal stereotype of gays as hypersexual and old people as asexual, this is hardly surprising.

Less than half of the adult gay characters are single. They range from extremely troubled to quite content. Unfortunately, most of the single adults are unhappy.

There are four male and four female adult couples portrayed. The people in these relationships fare better than the singles in terms of mental health and happiness, but the relationships themselves can cause problems, such as a loss of a job. Five of the relationships are simply good for those involved in them. The willingness of authors (and editors and publishers) to portray happy gay adult relationships appears to be increasing. But the trend toward happier gay adults is still not strong. Certainly it is easier for a person to be a member of the dominant culture in our society. But novels in which there are strong messages about the difficulties of being a minority without equally strong messages about the rewards, or about the strengths required to survive as a member of that minority, would not be recommended for teenagers of either the minority or the majority group.

Most of the novels have teenagers who have (or are interested in having) same-sex love relationships. Of these relationships, one-third last to the end of the book. The rest break up during the course of the book, either by one person ending the relationship, one person dying or moving, or because the understanding was that this encounter would happen only once. A few self-identified gay teenagers have no sexual relationships at all during the book. The couples who do survive are all fairly happy within their relationships, but often have problems when they face the world as a couple. They are harassed by their peers, and several of them are physically injured by their harassers. Only a few couples carry on relatively untraumatic romances.

Ordinarily, when a teenage couple breaks up, both people begin (after some period of mourning) looking for someone else, if they don't already have the next person "waiting in the wings." This happens only rarely in these books. The reader practically never gets to see teenagers who get involved in same-sex relationships go on to new partners. The message is that same-sex affairs are difficult to recover from—so difficult, in fact, that there are no future loves after such a relationship. Teenage love certainly brings its share of problems, whatever the sex of those involved, but the "relationship as problem" issue is one that still dogs both teen and adult gay relationships in these books. This being the case, it must be said that despite occasional (and usually recent) bright spots, young adult gay literature tends to confirm the stereotype of gay people as basically single.

Most gay people are thought to live predominantly in large coastal cities. Few gay people are thought to live in the suburbs, and almost none in small towns and rural areas. These young adult novels have settings that reflect these assumptions, but also deviate from them in some interesting ways.

Less than a quarter of the novels are set in large cities, and of these most are in New York City. The others are Albany, Phoenix, and Kansas City. San Francisco may be the gay city
in the minds of many Americans, but the closest these books get to San Francisco is Pasadena. Nearly half of the books are set in small towns, and the rest are set in the isolated realms of boarding school and summer camp. Given the assumed (and often actual) course of gay people’s lives, at first this may seem logical. Wherever he or she was raised, when a teenager in a rural area realizes he or she is gay, they often move to an urban area with a gay community. Therefore, to have small town teenagers with same-sex attractions discover their feelings, deal with whatever difficulties may arise because of isolation and others’ prejudices, and finally make a move to end their isolation by moving to a city seems to be a natural progression. But in young adult books, fictional gay teenagers and adults tend to remain fairly isolated. Those living in small towns may or may not have lovers, but they almost never find even one other gay person and establish a kind of gay friendship network.

The three books by British author David Rees are notable for their consistent inclusion of a gay community. Most of the other novels fail to even hint at the existence of a larger community of gay people outside of the particular town or milieu in which the story takes place.

Another persistent stereotype about gay people is that their sexual orientation originated in a troubled home. A significant number of gay teenagers in young adult novels have parents who are psychologically or physically absent. This pattern of missing parents is not as pervasive now as it was several years ago, but it has not entirely disappeared. Questions of causality aside, the main message of the negative parenting in these books is to reinforce the likelihood that bad things happen to gay characters, either in the story itself, or in the characters’ pasts.

The final aspect of societal stereotyping of gay people is that of sexual experience. This stereotype has two sides and often breaks down along male/female lines. One side says that gay people are very promiscuous, and think about sex constantly. This is usually applied to males. The other side says that since gay people are physically similar, there is little they can actually do together sexually, and so their sexual activity is confined to hugging and kissing. This is usually applied to females. Young adult novels in general tend to tread a fine line between general and specific when describing sexual activity, and details are often foggy beyond the first kiss. Lack of sexual detail is evident throughout all young adult literature. But fictional gay people have very little sex at all. For example, Davey and Doug kiss, but the rest of their activity is merely alluded to as “it” and “that” when the boys talk, and the reader never does learn what they did beyond kissing. The effect of these books is to either trivialize or mystify gay sexuality for their readers. If readers are looking for sexual information, they get very little.

These 38 young adult books with gay characters or themes can be examined as a group to show not only what has been available in the past, but also what may be available in the future. Eighteen years have passed since the publication of I'll Get There, If Better Be Worth the Trip. This publishing trend may have peaked in 1981-83 in terms of number of titles per year, but new books continue to be published. Since 1985, publishers have slightly changed their perspective on homosexuality. In most of the earlier novels, the main issue was that of homosexuality. Central characters had same-sex experiences, wondered about their sexual orientation, or faced problems brought on by their gay identity. The move in mainstream publishing has been away from homosexuality-as-main-issue, and toward treating gay issues as either a subplot or a fact that is stated but not commented upon at any length. Perhaps there will come a time when a novel appears containing a protagonist who is gay in a plot which is not chiefly dealing with gay problems.

A major subject of young adult books is
teen-parent relationships. Gay parents are no longer thought of as a contradiction in terms, but there are still too few novels that include them—particularly lesbian mothers.

AIDS has become a societal concern in the last five years, and young adult books are beginning to reflect this. Over ten young adult books about AIDS have been published since 1985. Two of these are novels. In one, the person with AIDS is straight; in the other, the person with AIDS is gay, but both suffer cruel and continual discrimination from nearly everyone around them. The people who persecute them are portrayed as ignorant and the unlikelihood of casual AIDS transmission is stated, but in both books it is ignorance that prevails. Given the very real discrimination that people with AIDS face, this is not unrealistic, but it is important to balance out ignorance with knowledge.

Young adults read fiction for many reasons, and one of these reasons is to get information. The information they gather helps to form their world view. Perpetuating stereotypes does a grave disservice to teenage readers. Realistic, balanced, and diverse portrayals of gay people and issues are important criteria in evaluating these—and future—young adult novels.

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on Ruby is ultimately positive, and Ruby faces her own future with growing self-esteem. This is a well-written novel of first love and the adolescent journey out of the family and into the world of peers. It is also the only gay young adult novel to feature main characters who are black. (Second book of the Cathy family trilogy) (age 13-up)


Pete Hanson is 15 years old, but at 5'11" he is by far the smallest boy in his class. His size and lack of muscle create Pete to worry about his masculinity. His worries are compounded by his mother's dressmaking business. He helps her sew and his father, a mechanic, is there sure must be something wrong with him for being good at "girl's work." After a lot more worry (and a pick-up attempt from a man driving by), Pete goes to an understanding counselor and has his mind put at ease on the counseling differences between sex role behavior and sexual behavior. Pete decides he's probably straight (though he also can see that the man in the car was perfectly happy being gay), and begins to accept his abilities as not merely "slanny stuff," but work he enjoys and is good at. (age 11-up)


Tom is a newcomer at a high school in rural Iowa. One of his new friends may or may not be gay, but their association marks Tom in the eyes of his classmates. Although this novel is marred by the unnecessarily dramatic car accident which seriously injures Tom's friend, it is a good book for discussion. This novel deals with the motivation and destructiveness of gossip and vividly portrays the intense paranoia that homophobia can cause. Hall creates a stark picture of homophobia and the ignorance it stems from. (age 11-up)


A novel about the problems young people face when they confront parental and societal expectations. Wally Witherspoon is at odds with his father because he boasts his family's business. Sabra St. Amour is a television soap opera star who is trying to differentiate her own career goals from those of her mother. And Charlie Gilhooley is the town outcast for telling his family and friends he "believed he preferred boys to girls." Although Charlie is a likeable character and self-accepting, the face of social ostracism, he is a loser. Despite his Greek god good looks, he never inspires attraction in anyone else throughout the course of the book. By the end of the novel, Wally and Sabra separate more from their parents and Charlie gains acceptance by happily taking Wally's place as junior partner in the family business.


Fifteen-year-old Val Hoffman meets Chloe Fox at an exclusive private high school in New York City. Both new students, they feel like outsiders in a world of debutantes and wealthy classmates, and their outcast status draws them together. Val's constant observation and questioning of the world around her is a finely-drawn portrait of adolescence. It is also refreshing that Val is clearly identified as Jewish throughout the book; this is not an issue, but simply a fact. A funny and tender narrative of Val and Chloe's friendship and the difficult process of growing up. (age 13-up)


Jaret and Peggy are two teenage girls who confront and surmount the problems of being gay in high school. Their relationship faces a crisis when Jaret is violently assaulted and raped by Mid, a boy who is a classmate of her brother's. The narrative shifts between a sympathetic account of the girls' relationship and Mid's disturbing inner monologue while spying on Jaret and Peggy. After the rape, issues of coming out are raised; they are threatening enough to frighten Peggy away from the relationship, albeit temporarily. Jaret's matter-of-fact acceptance of her own gay feelings is a refreshing change from the torment most fictional gay teenagers go through. This is indeed a young adult "problem novel," but the problem is that of rape and public reaction to homosexuality, rather than gayness itself. (age 13-up)


Tim has been attracted to his friend Aaron for a long time, but his strict religious upbringing makes it hard for him to even think about his feelings, let alone act on them. Then the two of them plan a holiday back-packing trip with two other boys, Roy and John. The trip turns from pleasure to adventure as they get lost in the wilderness. This adversity helps Tim accept both himself and Aaron as having different preferences that will keep them from being lovers, but won't keep them from being friends. Tim's resourcefulness on the trip also contributes to his growing self-confidence, and the novel ends with Tim looking forward to adulthood and an end to his isolation as a gay teenager. (age 13-up)


Ali Rose lives in New York City with her mother, her brother Martin, and her mother's lover, Peggy. While spending the summer in California with her father and his new wife, Ali is confronted with the fact that her mother and Peggy are more than "just good friends." Her father's resulting hysteria is both alarming and realistic. A custody battle is brewing and people-pleaser Ali is caught in the middle. The outcome is unexpectedly tame, as Ali tells her father she'd prefer living with her mother and her father acquiesces with little objection (quite surprising, given his earlier vehement disapproval). This is the only young adult book available that includes a lesbian mother. (age 13-up)

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ship is to continue. While the heterosexual relationship is described in detail, the lesbian relationship is quite vague. This is not surprising, given that Macy is the narrator, but it makes the gay relationship unnecessarily mysterious. This is primarily a novel about the importance of friendship. (age 13-up)


Michelle comes to Turnbull School with a vision of it as an Eden, a paradise. Here she will make permanent friends and escape the isolating effects that the accidental deaths of her father and brother have had on her and her mother. She does make good friends, and her best friend Marty, an unstable but artistically talented girl from a rich family, gives her support for her own writing talent. Priscilla Kincaid, a well-known artist, comes to teach at Turnbull and Marty becomes her prizewinning pupil. Her feelings about art and Priscilla become confounding to her, and when Sylvie, another unstable girl, develops a crush on Marty, the gossip begins and the relationships eventually come to a crisis. Sylvie makes an unsuccessful suicide attempt, Priscilla goes back to her husband, and Marty leaves Turnbull in disgrace. Michelle mourns the loss of a friendship, and is measured by her writing teacher that same-sex relationships are just a stage that many teens go through on their way to maturity. This is an unfortunate soap opera of a novel. Tolan is a fine writer, but the characters and motivations are inconsistent and unrealistic. She also perpetuates the cliches of gay-as-lonely, gay-as-sickness, and gay-as-only-a-stage all in one book. (age 13-up)


Louis Lambert is determined to make changes in his life. Now that he is a sixth-grader he will no longer answer to “Billy Lou,” he will try to learn to play softball, and he will do his best to become a Somebody with his classmates. Mr. Forster, Louis’ new teacher, provides him with the encouragement he needs to shine, but new problems arise when parents discover that Mr. Forster is gay and his housemate is also his partner. The setting is Kansas City, Missouri, 1958, so the outcome is predictably pessimistic for gay teachers, but Mr. Forster’s character and influence are extremely positive. (age 10-14)


Jinx Tuckwell is a senior (class of ’65) at an exclusive girls’ boarding school. She is unsure of her future after graduation, though she has an interest in art. She is also attracted to the wild and beautiful Leslie Hayes, an unpredictable classmate with a lovely singing voice and a taste for crazy escapades. Leslie becomes interested in Jinx for unclear reasons, and Jinx responds wholeheartedly. She wonders if her attraction to Leslie is sexual, or just a fascination, but she gets no answers from Leslie or anyone else. Eventually Leslie gets both girls kicked out of school, and Jinx leaves, still confused and still questioning her feelings for Leslie. The old myth of gay-relationships-as-prelude-to-disaster is evidence here, as well as the cruel, controlling, and flawed character of that temptress, Leslie. (age 12-up)


During his fourteenth summer, Eric spends his days with his long-time friend Chris and his new friend Owen, a reclusive 21-year-old sculptor who lives nearby. Owen in turn is drawn to Eric by his resemblance to Owen’s son, who died at sixteen. As their friendship develops, Eric’s parents become suspicious of Owen’s interest in Eric, but are finally able to see and appreciate the positive effect they have on each other. Eric and Chris are also drawn closer as the summer progresses, and their attraction first disrupts, but then strengthens, their friendship. This is a well-written novel about the complexities of love.


Jenny is a teenager who goes to summer camp to escape from her oppressive family. While there she is delighted to be friends with Peggy, her riding counselor, but then is shocked and dismayed to learn that Peggy has a lesbian relationship with another counselor. Jenny returns home with ambivalence about their relationship, and about same-sex relationships in general. She ends up wondering if she, too, will become a lesbian, given the intensity of her crush on Peggy. This prospect does not appeal to her, but she thinks of times when her father sent her to her room when she’s been upset and ordered her to “come out smiling,” and hopes that she will be able to do the same if she is attracted to women in the future. This is not a particularly positive view of gayness, as the stereotype of “a gay life is a sad life” is reinforced with the chint-zin-adversity peptalk more suitable for dealing with terminal disease than sexual orientation. (age 13-up)


A novel about male friendship in the world of high school football. Alex is straight and Alex is gay, but their shared interest in football might have created a bond between them. When Alex’s friend becomes uninterested in knowledge, Alex is persuaded by his family and team-mates to give up football. Although Alex decides that his relationship with Alex is worth the price, the small-town atmosphere and attitudes play up the high cost of being gay. A good male friendship story, but the
viewpoint is tinged with "gayness as tragic flaw". (age 13-up)


Margo Allinger is at boarding school for the first time, and is hoping to make lasting friends, since her family has moved a lot in the past. Most of her classmates are unfriendly, if not cruel, to the newcomer, but she gets support and encouragement from Miss Frye, the tennis coach. Margo's tennis game and self-confidence blossom. Miss Frye, however, has been labeled a lesbian by the students, and Margo becomes (temporarily) tainted by association. Margo finally learns the truth from Miss Frye herself, and accepts the fact of her past relationship with Miss Durrett, who was a former English teacher. Margo decides to distance herself from Miss Frye to quell gossip and In with her peers. Although Miss Frye is an attractive character, she loses her position as honest, conscientious, and extremely competitive. Both lesbian teachers are leading isolated lives, and Miss Durrett embodies some of the worst stereotypes of women becoming lesbians because they are unattractive and can't get a man. (age 13-up)


Stephen and Charlotte have been classmates since junior high, but early in their senior year they are drawn together in a relationship of mutual support in dealing with their dysfunctional families—Stephen's father is an active alcoholic and Charlotte is an incest victim. They become part of a tight group of friends, and Stephen becomes aware of his attraction to Rolf, another group member. Stephen and Rolf's relationship is important to both of them, and their friends accept them (and occasionally tease them) as they would any heterosexual couple. This novel is a fine portrait of the warmth of teenage friendship groups. (age 14-up)


When sixteen-year-old Hal first meets Barry he is amazed by the immediate attraction he feels. Unfortunately, their relationship ends prematurely when Barry dies in a motorcycle accident. The stereotypically tragic end (traffic fatalities are remarkably common in the lives of fictional gay characters) mars an otherwise fine coming-of-age story with a sharply humorous narrative voice. (age 14-up)


Lisa and Annie are two New York City high school students who meet by chance at a museum. Their friendship grows into attraction and love. Both girls are vividly drawn, and the relationship between working-class/public school Annie and upper-middle-class/private school Lisa is immediately interesting. The reader also meets two lesbians who teach at Lisa's school; they have lived together for many years, and they provide Annie and Lisa with the assurance that their love is indeed possible and that the world is not as frightening as it was previously thought. (age 14-up)

Annie and Liza. Although both young women face conflicts in accepting their feelings for each other, this is a positive story that captures the magic and intensity of first love. (age 12-up)


Jerry B. Blankenship has traveled around with his gypsyish family for most of his 13 years. The family arrives in Fairleigh, Kentucky, and Jerry hopes to settle down and make real friends. Mr. Wilkes is the new principal, a bachelor who many in town "wonder about." Nate Lemor, the good old boy sheriff, seems particularly suspicious of Wilkes, but then Jerry and a friend happen to see the two men together at Wilkes' house. They say nothing, but (unsuspectingly) rumors of Wilkes' sexual interest in boys start to circulate. The principal is finally found dead, shot by the sheriff who says he was resisting arrest, but in fact murdered by the sheriff to keep the secret of their relationship from being revealed. This is a disturbing story about the inevitable downfall of gay people, the dangers of intersexual homophobia, and the deadly power of rumor. It also says that being gay will literally kill you. (age 14-up)


This is an excellent coming-out, coming-of-age story told by Ewen, a working-class teenager living in an isolated English town. At fifteen he becomes aware of his sexual preference through his attraction to his straight best friend, the first in a long series of steps he must go through on his way to maturity and self-acceptance. Ewen eventually moves to London, becomes self-supporting, and moves into a mature long-term relationship with another man. The author does a fine job of exploring the fear, the excitement, and the tedium of the years spent waiting to grow up as an adolescent gay man or lesbian. (age 14-up)


Sixteen-year-old Mike feels attracted to his best friend, Todd. Mike doesn't act on his feelings, but in time begins to accept himself as gay. The turning point comes when he tells Todd of his attraction, and Todd not only reaffirms their (platonically) friendship, but offers to help Mike tell his parents. Although Mike runs into the usual teenage homophobic name-calling common among high school students, he also gets a great deal of support from nearly everyone he comes out to. Mike's friends are a re-
markably (perhaps unrealistically) enlightened bunch, but Mike is a thoughtful narrator and his path to self-knowledge makes absorbing reading. (age 13-up)


Nana is a shy loser who decides to attend her school’s riding ranch in Wyoming for the summer. There she meets Flick, an older girl who is attractive and mysterious, and appears to like Nana. The two begin spending time together; Nana is thrilled and infatuated. Their relationship develops into a personal one, but Flick remains erratic and can treat Nana very cruelly. Although Nana’s friends warn her that Flick is not to be counted on, she ignores their warnings and continues her involvement. Finally, Flick breaks up with her and Nana is humiliated. Taken by itself, this novel is a well-written account of the pain of first love. Taken with other gay young adult novels, particularly those with female main characters, this is a rehash of the same evil-and-crazy-lesbian-temptress theme.


Seventeen-year-old Neil tells the dramatic, though unlikely, story of the first months of his relationship with Paul. They meet and are immediately attracted to each other. Homophobic classmates target them and Paul is badly beaten and hospitalized. Neil uses his kung-fu expertise to get revenge. This is a poorly-written melodrama of first love, fat-bashing, and parental anguish, but on the bright side the wooden characters and simplistic plot are no worse than television soap opera fare, and there is a happy ending. (age 13-up)


Becky is sixteen and so is her best friend Nemi. Both are acting in a school play. During the production Becky becomes infatuated with Blake, a handsome new student, and Nemi is attracted to Lella, Blake’s sister. However, as the show progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Becky and Nemi’s friendship has turned to love, and by the end of the book (and the show opening) they are together. The group dynamics involved within the company of a high school show are well-drawn. In the midst of various old and new relationships, both romantic and friendly, are Richie and Craig, two secondary characters who fall in love with each other. There are various “true lovers” in this novel, and though none of their paths run smooth, they and the reader are certain that their love is right for them. Singer does an excellent job of integrating gay and straight teenagers in a believable way. I recommend this book unreservedly. (age 12-up)


Polly O’Keefe is the sixteen-year-old daughter of Meg and Calvin O’Keefe, who readers may have met as main characters in A Wrinkle in Time. Although intelligent and mature, Polly is suffering the pangs of adolescent awkwardness and feels “out of it” with her high school peers. Then along comes a talented artist friend of the O’Keefes, Max, who lives nearby with Ursula, her companion of 30 years. Max takes Polly under her wing, and their friendship gives Polly confidence and self-appreciation. But Max appears ill and is in fact dying. She has kept her condition a secret, but Polly guesses the truth. As Polly and Max’s friendship grows stronger, Polly learns she is a girl—that she and Ursula are lovers. The plot takes several soap opera twists, and Polly is finally able to accept Max as the flawed but-beautiful person she is. The author appears to have good intentions here, but her portrayal of gayness, even in two well-respected, “happily married” women, verges on tragedy, and the message is that gayness is OK only as long as it is kept secret. This is an extremely self-righteous and aggravating book. (age 14-up)


Mike has lived with his mother, aunt, and cousin nearly all his life, but suddenly his long-absent father gets in touch with him, and he goes to spend three weeks with him to get reacquainted. Mike learns almost immediately that his father, a children’s book author, is gay, and this is why his mother kept Mike away from him. The three weeks with his father change the sixteen-year-old’s life— not in “turning him gay” (which is what his mother feared), but in opening him up to the world outside his provincial town and in establishing a warm and friendly relationship with his father. While the father is seen as essentially single—Mike’s visit precipitates the end of his father’s six-year relationship with a temperamental musician—he is a charming and multi-faced person who counters many stereotypes of gay men. He educates Mike about gayness without being preachy, and Mike accepts him with a minimum of storm and drang. A refreshing father and son story, and the only one I’ve found that includes a gay father as a central character. (age 13-up)


Thirteen-year-old Jess Judd is a bright and rather lonely boy who lives on a farm with his grandmother and her husband. When Jess strikes up a friendship with Meechum, the school handyman, he enlists the help of Mr. Goodban, his English teacher, to keep Meechum from failing eighth grade for the third time. Through his teacher Jess gains an appreciation for both literature and his grandparents. Mr. Goodban’s warm relationship with his male lover is portrayed, but not commented upon, and their friendship to Jess and Meechum underscores the theme of the valuable support that non-familial love can provide. (age 12-up)

Melanie has been in love with Paul since they were childhood friends. Their friendship grew throughout their teenage years, and the dream of having "happily ever after" with him. Paul, however, becomes elusive and distant, and Melanie wonders why he doesn’t return the romantic love she feels for him. When Paul finally tells her that he is gay, she is angry and dismayed, but slowly comes to accept him, and their friendship is eventually re-established. This is a well-intentioned "predictable novel" with some serious flaws. The writing is dull, the plot is predictable, and the characters are undistinguished and vaguely drawn. Even Paul and Melanie are memorable only in that he is gay, and she wishes he weren’t. There is also the stereotypical assumption on everyone’s part that Paul will inevitably have a sad life. Paul educes Melanie about gayness (it isn’t a sickness, it isn’t because he doesn’t like women, it isn’t her fault...) through a series of speeches at the end of the book. Perhaps some of this information will rub off on readers. Perhaps. (age 13-up)


Erick’s older brother, Peter, has come home to tell his family some important and devastating news—Peter is gay, and Peter has AIDS. The impact on Erick’s life is considerable. His parents are determined to keep this news from their friends and neighbors, and, when Peter’s condition becomes public knowledge, the family is universally shunned. Erick’s girlfriend, Nicki, deserts him, and he is plunged back into intimate family life just when his other high school friends are leaving home. Peter is a likable character, and he and Erick have a good relationship, but his illness brings such unbelievable tragedy to everyone in his family that the reader is left with an unnecessarily grim picture of gay life in the current AIDS crisis. This is the first young adult novel to deal with this subject. One hopes there will be others in the future that contain more information about the lives that people with AIDS can still lead. (age 14-up)


From the moment Win first walks into Elliott’s house, he is certain that their relationship is dangerous (a Big Brother-type organization plans to be a disaster). Elliott cares nothing for team sports, serves Win gazpacho for lunch, and doesn’t even own a television. Win and his mother and brother have recently moved to Santa Fe, and the adjustment isn’t easy, but Elliott provides Win with unexpected support and understanding. And Win teaches Elliott that listening to opera and preparing gourmet food can actually be pretty interesting. Although Elliott fits a number of gay male stereotypes, his sexual orientation is never made explicit, and Win finds that friendship is more important than fitting the traditional masculine mold. (age 12-up)


At fourteen Tyler Woodruff has one passion in his life—photography. He is a lonely boy, estranged from his father (who believes photographing birds is for sissies), his mother (who is an alcoholic), and his older brother Cameron (who has been banished from the family for being gay and becoming an interior decorator). When Tyler first meets Mitz Gerrard, he is immediately put off by her brash manner and loud mouth, but their mutual interest in photography draws them together, and Tyler is finally able to talk to someone about his feelings about his dysfunctional family. Tyler’s relationship with his brother is particularly difficult for him, as he has confused Cam’s sexual preference with his non-availability, and has ceased making an effort to stay in contact with him. This is a coming-of-age novel of sorts, and one of the better ones I’ve read, with the characters changing slowly enough to be realistic, but quickly enough to give the reader hope for the character’s future.


Eighteen-year-old Richard leaves home after a quarrel with his parents and almost immediately picks up hitchhiker Bonny, a tart-tongued, working class teen who is also running away. It quickly becomes obvious to the reader (though not to Bonny) that Richard is running from his upper middle class family’s homophobic response to his declaration of love for his male lover, Jan. Richard and Bonny’s friendship deepens and they help each other broaden their outlook and appreciate their differences. Richard’s problem is not his gayness but his difficulty in facing parental and societal disapproval. Fortunately, love and common sense win out and Richard returns to Jan, Bonny to her (incidentally lesbian) foster parents, and both have grown in the process. An encouraging look at the ways people of different backgrounds—both sexual orientation and class—can enrich each others’ lives.


Augsie is a shy, intelligent girl who falls in love with Sam, a wheelchair-bound classmate, during their senior year of high school. Claudia, Augsied’s best friend, has “known since she was five that she was gay.” When they go off to college, Augsie and Sam drift apart and Claudia establishes her first serious relationship with another woman. Through the course of the novel all of them continue on their journey toward maturity and adulthood. As is the case in several more recent young adult novels with gay or lesbian characters, Claudia, and those around her, are aware of her sexual orientation, but it is treated as a fact rather than an issue.

Although there are no gay or lesbian characters in this novel, its theme of the impact of AIDS on people's life makes it relevant to this bibliography. The story is told in three voices—17-year-old Alex, his 15-year-old sister Christy, and his girlfriend Shannon. A year earlier Alex was a passenger in a drunk-driving accident and received blood transfusions. The blood was unscreened, and from it he contracted the AIDS virus. He recovers from his injuries, but later becomes rundown, and is diagnosed with ARC. The news gets out and he and his family become pariahs. After educating the ignorant school and town officials, Alex returns to school with the support of his family and his girlfriend. This novel contains valuable information about ARC and AIDS in a readable format, but is definitely a "problem novel" with the flatness of character and plot that plagues this genre. There is also almost no mention of gay people in a book about a disease for which gay men account for 70 percent of the cases. (age 13-up)


Brie, the narrator, meets Josh, the new boy in town. Josh has a slightly mysterious past (rumor has it he was kicked out of military school for having an affair with the colonel's daughter), but is extremely good-looking, witty, and intelligent, and Brie falls for him hard. Brie becomes constant companions, but Josh offers only friendship, while Brie longs for romance. Finally, Josh tells Brie that he's homosexual. Brie is upset, and shuns Josh for some time before she finally decides that they can indeed be friends. Her understanding of his "condition" has its homophobic side, as she laments his "wasted masculinity." Unfortunately, the stereotype of gay person as lonely outsider doomed to a life of isolation and pity was still alive and well in 1987.


Nina is a ninth-grader living in New York City whose divorced parents have joint custody. Shared custody is fine with Nina until her father tells her that he is gay and his lover is moving in with him. Both Nina and her mother react negatively. Nina worries about sharing her father's attention and the social stigma of having a gay parent, and her mother sees her ex-husband's homosexuality as one more rejection. After a two month separation from her father, Nina is able to sort out her own feelings and finally reconciles with her father. This novel explores a situation that has seldom been dealt with in young adult novels—that of children coming to terms with their gay parents.


Billy Kennedy is sixteen years old and has rarely been away from his small town home in Missouri. He goes to spend the summer with Uncle Wes in Tucson, who has lined up a job for him at a nearby stable and racetrack. Wes is gay and out to family and community. The summer strengthens the relationship between uncle and nephew, and helps Billy further his understanding of stereotyping and sexual identity. Billy also has his first romantic relationship with Cara Mae, a home exerciser at the track. Uncle Wes' complete acceptance of his own gay identity and his warm regard for his nephew come through strongly, as does life in a gay community that is facing the AIDS crisis. The book contains a delightful amount of gay "camp" humor, and is one of the only young adult books that places a gay character in the context of the network of friends that makes up the gay community.