

Clearing Paths for Transgender Identities with Middle Grades Literature

KATHERINE MASON CRAMER

Today's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and agender (LGBTQIA) individuals are not waiting until high school or college to come out, despite the fact that often, for queer youth, "middle school is more survival than learning" (Denizet-Lewis, 2009). According to the 2015 Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educator Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey, "LGBTQ students in middle schools face more hostile climates than LGBTQ students in high schools" (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016, p. 97). As middle level educators, we must provide students access to quality middle grades queer literature that speaks to their experiences. Specifically, we must make space in our libraries and curricula for middle grades literature that features transgender characters. Within the LGBTQIA umbrella, gender identity/expression is often conflated with sexual orientation and overlooked, yet research indicates that children typically begin expressing their gender identity before age five, and between .5 and 1.5 percent of teenagers identify as transgender (Blad, 2017; Hoffman, 2016). This means that in a typical middle school teacher's student load, at least one student is statistically likely to be transgender.

Additionally, schools are gendered spaces (e.g., girls and boys restrooms/locker rooms, sports teams, extracurricular groups), which can be distressing for students whose gender identities are not affirmed. This gendered space contributes to a school culture in which cisgender¹ students (and faculty and staff) view any gender expression that differs from the male/female binary as "other." And that has especially negative consequences for transgender students in middle schools, who, *while at school*, are more likely than their high school peers to face verbal harassment (46.6%), physical harassment (16.3%), and physical assault (7%) based on

how they express their gender (Kosciw, et al., 2016, p. 97). This is a health and safety issue, and we must take action.

Biegel (2010) argues that since "the great majority of Americans have never interacted knowingly with a transgender person, and even fewer have developed any sort of close personal relationship with one," educators "would do well to identify [texts] that document the experiences of those who identify under the transgender umbrella" (p. 185). In this article, I will briefly describe a framework for analyzing queerness in texts for young readers; highlight four middle grade novels that feature trans characters, as well as a local controversy surrounding one of them; and make the case that

these novels are not only appropriate but necessary for young readers and the educators who teach them, regardless of their gender identities.

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Queer Community

In their 2006 book *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content 1969–2004*, Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins developed a framework of three overlapping categories to analyze queer literature:

1. **Homosexual Visibility:** In these books, the central focus is a character who comes out either voluntarily or involuntarily and faces the positive or negative consequences of doing so.
2. **Gay Assimilation:** These books depict a "melting pot" of sexual and gender identity" in which a character "just happens" to be queer without any further exploration of that identity.
3. **Queer Community:** These books depict queer characters within a supportive community of other queer people and/or allies. (p. xx)

Cart and Jenkins (2006) argue that queer literature for (young) adolescent readers needs to be “more than coming-out stories,” noting that “many teens now make the transition from the closet to an out life without peril” (p. 166). In fact, each of the novels described in this article realizes Cart and Jenkins’s call for stories that depict queer community; in each story, readers meet family members, friends, friends’ parents, and educators who strive to support and encourage the queer protagonist. Such stories offer a realistic and hopeful view of living authentically, and they provide models for cisgender readers to reflect on their own encounters and relationships with transgender people.

George (2015) by Alex Gino

Alex Gino’s novel *George* is about ten-year-old Melissa, who wants the role of Charlotte in her class’s production of *Charlotte’s Web*. Even with a stellar performance during tryouts, her teacher refuses to cast her in the role of Charlotte (a spider) because, since Melissa’s assigned gender at birth was male, everyone knows her as George, and “imagine how confused people would be” (Gino, 2015b, p. 70). When Melissa comes out to her best friend Kelly, she helps her prepare to play the role for which she was destined. Melissa’s brother Scott also provides support and assurance, even before her mom chooses to do so. This novel, which Gino dedicated “to you, for when you felt different,” is a story of hope, resilience, and authenticity.

Gracefully Grayson (2014) by Ami Polonsky

Similar to Melissa in *George*, sixth-grader Grayson also tries out for the lead female role in the school play, except Grayson actually gets the part. Her humanities teacher Finn understands that Grayson is the best fit for the role of Persephone, the Greek goddess of spring—and faces tremendous consequences for supporting his star performer. As Grayson gets more involved in the play, she discovers she has a group of friends who validate her identity and gender expression—even if they are not yet fully aware of who Grayson is. Grayson’s family—her aunt, uncle, and cousins, with whom she lives—convey their support more gradually, even though Grayson expressed her female identity as a young child—and was supported in doing so by her parents before they died. In a particularly moving scene, Grayson reads a letter

that her mom wrote when Grayson was a small child: “Grayson is who he is. If he continues to insist that he’s a girl, then it’s our job to support him. All I want is for him to be true to himself. . . . Paul and I both still want Grayson to have the power to show the world who he is— whoever that may be—on his own terms and in his own time” (p. 104). Grayson’s parents prove to be powerful allies even though they are not physically present.

Lily and Dunkin (2016) by Donna Gephart

Eighth graders Lily Jo McGrother (assigned male at birth and named Tim) and Norbert Dorfman (a.k.a. Dunkin) narrate this story, which readers can discern by the change in font that begins each of their semi-alternating sections. Most of Lily’s loved ones support her living as her authentic self: her mom and sister Sarah both provide validation, her grandpa Bob was supportive before his death, and her best friend Dare gets frustrated

when Lily doesn’t show the world who she is. On the other hand, Lily’s dad worries about her safety, and Lily is still “Tim” at school and around Dunkin throughout most of the book. Interestingly, this story is not just about Lily’s journey toward living as her authentic self; it’s also about her standing up for what’s right, including protesting the city’s decision to remove a big banyan tree. It’s about her father coming to terms with the dangers of

not affirming his daughter’s gender identity. It’s about Dunkin’s struggle with mental illness and his own father’s suicide; and it’s about friendship, honesty, and acceptance.

The Other Boy (2016) by M.G. Hennessey

While the previous three texts feature transgender girls, Hennessey’s *The Other Boy* depicts a transgender boy who is already passing as a boy by going stealth² at his new school. In fact, twelve-year-old Shane has been on hormone blockers to prevent the onset of female puberty, and—after initial protests from his dad—he receives support from both parents to start testosterone shots. Shane is the star pitcher on the baseball team, and he loves playing video games with his best friend Josh, working on his graphic novel, and spending time with his crush Madeline. The main conflict in the story arises when another athlete, jealous of Shane’s success on the ball field, outs him with photos from Shane’s former life living as a girl. While Shane experiences isolation and

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depression, he also discovers that he has allies beyond his family: his baseball team, Josh, and Josh’s parents. Even Madeline demonstrates compassion when she admits that she is not comfortable dating Shane, though she likes him and wants “to be okay with [his gender identity]” (p. 171). Hennessey takes this novel a step further by depicting not only Shane’s positive relationships with allies but also with members of the queer community in his PFLAG³ support group. For example, his mentor Alejandra is a trans girl in high school who has dealt with bullying and is able to provide empathy, advice, encouragement, and perspective.

1. What does it mean to be or look/act like a boy or girl? How did you learn this?
2. Is it important that you know a person’s gender? Why or why not?
3. In what ways are gender norms constructed and reinforced in the world around us (e.g., print and nonprint texts, school, society)? In what ways have you observed people, texts, and other entities challenging or disrupting gender norms? In what ways do you question (and help others question) gender norms? (Cramer & Adams, 2016)

Integrating these Texts into Middle Level Curriculums

I encourage middle level teachers to bring these and other middle grades books that depict diverse gender and sexual identities into their classrooms first by reading them themselves and then introducing them via book talks (Kittle, 2013, pp. 59–67), book passes (Allen, 1999), and literature circles (Daniels, 2002). These actions may inspire students to consider choosing these books for independent reading workshop (Atwell, 2014), during which teachers can assess comprehension, engagement, and interest with conferences (Kittle, 2013). Additionally, I encourage teachers to purposefully select and teach excerpts from these books to help students consider multiple perspectives, demonstrate empathy, and consider how their words and actions impact others (Cramer, 2016). Teachers using any of these middle grade novels, or excerpts from them, might pose questions like these:

Cisgender readers can learn what it means to be an ally, while transgender readers can envision a sense of community and support as they live authentically. This is especially important, considering the increasing violence endured by members of the trans community as well as the spread of anti-transgender laws.

Appropriateness of Middle Grades Queer Literature

There are some adults who want to keep books that depict gender diversity out of young peoples’ hands. For example, *George* was the subject of considerable discussion in my city in late 2017. After *George* was nominated for the William Allen White (WAW) Award, the supervisor for library media in the largest school district in Kansas declined to include *George* in that year’s district-provided master set of WAW Award nominees for elementary and K–8 schools (Tobias, 2017a). Why? She cited mature language and gave the following examples from the text: In one scene, a school bully refers to Melissa, saying, “It looks like someone’s finally starting to grow some balls” (Gino, 2015b, p. 117). Later, when Melissa reveals to her older brother Scott that she is a girl, Scott makes a reference to a teen magazine she had left in the bathroom: “Dude, I thought you had porn or something in there, so I took a peek,” and then asks

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Whether or not your middle school reader identifies as LGBTQ, the social justice issues surrounding the characters in LGBTQ fiction will be motivating and generate opportunities for discussion and writing. This activity includes a list of age-appropriate books, a discussion-starter guide and ideas to extend beyond the books.

Lisa Storm Fink
www.ReadWriteThink.org

<http://bit.ly/2RAIGSr>

her about sex reassignment surgery: “So, like, do you want to’—he made a gesture with two fingers like a pair of scissors—‘go all the way?’” (Gino, 2015b, p. 141).

The library media supervisor thought this language was inappropriate for elementary and middle school students, but Gino said it best: “I wish that was the worst fourth graders heard” (Gino, 2017). In addition to being curious about his sister’s identity, Scott is supportive of Melissa’s decision to come out and live authentically: “Weird. But it kinda makes sense. No offense, but you don’t make a very good boy” (Gino, 2015b, p. 141). From his example, cisgender readers can learn what it means to be an ally, while transgender readers can envision a sense of community and support as they live authentically. This is especially important, considering the increasing violence endured by members of the trans community as well as the spread of anti-transgender laws (Astor, 2017). The day after the story broke, Gino raised funds through a Twitter campaign to purchase a hardback copy of *George* for every elementary and K–8 school in Wichita Public Schools (Tobias, 2017b).

Final Thoughts

We need these books in our curricula and libraries, and we should not assume that they feature explicit sexual encounters—a common misperception, particularly among those who have not read queer-themed YA or middle grades literature (Mason, 2008). Instead, these books are about queer characters embodying their true and full identities and about the families, friends, and allies who support and appreciate them. Alex Gino makes a compelling argument regarding the age-appropriateness of such books: “There is no age at which it is inappropriate to appreciate people for who they are. And there’s no age before we know ourselves” (Gino, 2015a). Gino (2015a) further argues that it is “critical for people of all ages to see a range of potentials to help them steer themselves in their own direction,” noting that “adults in a child’s life have a big choice in whether to provide tools to support kids in exploring and naming who they are, or whether to hide their road from them, and make it so much harder for them to clear the paths later.” As Gino noted in their⁴ 2017 talk at Wichita State University, access to information and validating stories saves lives (Gino, 2017). Making quality literature accessible to middle grades readers is such an easy first step to “clear the paths” for young people. Let’s have the

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courage to take that step and encourage our colleagues to do the same.

NOTES

1. *Cisgender* describes a person whose gender identity aligns with their assigned gender at birth.
2. *Going stealth* means choosing not to disclose one’s transgender identity in an effort to live authentically and safely. Going stealth comes with its own challenges, however, as the transgender person must hide an integral part of themselves from family, friends, classmates, teachers, and others.
3. In 2014, the organization officially changed its name from “Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays” to PFLAG. <https://www.pflag.org/our-story>
4. Alex Gino uses the singular *they*. <http://www.alexgino.com/about-alex/>

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Katherine Mason Cramer previously taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade English language arts in Kansas City, Kansas, and now prepares future English teachers at Wichita State University.

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