

Coming of Age and Coming of GAYge: An Interview with emily m. danforth

by: Katherine Mason

When I reviewed the notes I made in my personal reading log in September 2012 after reading emily m. danforth's debut novel *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, I had to smile: "Loved this book. The voice of Cameron Post will stay with me for a long time. Wry, tender, and smart, she is a character I'd like to spend more time with, even after 470 pages." I am not alone in my admiration for the book. *Cameron Post* has earned numerous accolades, including the 2012 Montana Book Award and starred reviews from *Kirkus*, *Booklist*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *School Library Journal*. In addition, it was a finalist for the William C. Morris YA Debut Award and the Lambda Literary Award. In February 2012 in a book review for National Public Radio, award-winning young adult author Malinda Lo described it as a novel that "transcends" the typical coming-out novel formula and "demonstrates why these stories still need to be told."

Described by danforth as a "coming-of-GAYge" story, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* invites the reader to experience adolescence through the eyes of Cameron Post. During the summer before her 13th birthday, Cameron's parents die in a car accident while she's stealing bubblegum and kissing her best friend Irene. Mixed with her sadness and shame is the relief that her parents will never know that she kissed a girl. This loss and revelation haunts Cameron for much of the novel as she swims and runs competitively, falls in and out of love, confides in her friends Lindsay and Jamie, and is outed by her crush (and friend) Coley Taylor to her ultra-religious Aunt Ruth. When Aunt Ruth opts to send Cameron to a conversion therapy school called God's Promise, Cameron finds a sense of community that she's never experienced before, as well as the courage to forgive Coley, her family, and most importantly herself.

KM: You write in your acknowledgements that Cameron's voice first emerged in a short story in a fiction workshop. Can you describe the process of developing her character and the characters who surround her?

emd: Cam is the only fictional character I've ever created whose experiences are most akin to my own past. The novel is, without

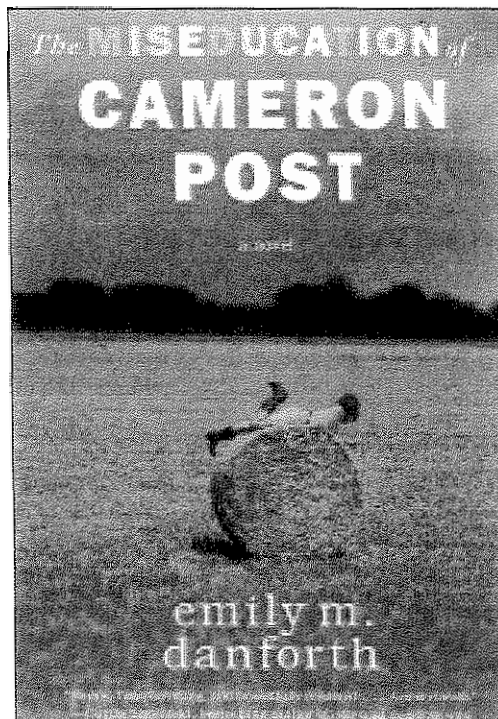
question, autobiographically informed—this is particularly true in its treatment of small town Montana in the early 1990s. However, in all kinds of crucial, crucial ways, Cam is not me, not even teenage me. (I'm not an orphan; I wasn't sent to conversion therapy; I didn't have a high school Coley Taylor-type break my heart.) Constructing Cam became a question of deciding when to rely on

my own memories of growing up queer in eastern Montana and when to deviate, often significantly, from those memories (which is what I did probably sixty percent of the time, because choosing to do so better served the story I was trying to tell). If I'd gotten too precious about my own memories—some of my own nostalgia—it would have weighed the book down considerably. This isn't to say that I didn't sneak some of that in—of course I did—but Cam emerged as a character who is unlike me in important, noticeable ways.

Every character in the novel comes from a piece of me—from something I've observed or thought about, a judgment I've had, a question I've considered. And I take liberally from people in my past, from those around me, but it's never a straightforward process of building a character, whole cloth, from the attributes of someone I know. I might borrow a hairstyle or a belief system, a way of phrasing something, but then I'll combine that with another element and another element, until these characters become very distinctive, not pulled from my world at all.

When friends from high school tell me that they recognize so and so (from our collective past) in *Cam Post*, I have to chuckle, because, you know, it's just not so—they're never right. But I think it gives readers who knew me then great pleasure to try to exactly match my own high school experiences with Cam's. It's not at all accurate, but I do understand the impulse.

KM: You write in a 2012 *Huffington Post* article that "the 1990s felt so fraught and, frankly, dangerous that from the ages of 8 to 18, closeted-me inhabited a very active and wholly imagined fantasy world in which a braver, not-closeted-me, was, well, braver and not closeted" ... which was ultimately "good fuel for fiction writing." At the 2012 Kansas state



English teacher's conference, I shared some of my favorite excerpts from *Cameron Post*, and one English teacher responded that Cam's voice sounded wise beyond her years. This is something that I love about your book. What do you think are some of the benefits of teens (and adults) reading from the perspective of such a strong, smart, witty character?

emd: Well, Cam-as-narrator is a bit older than the experiences she's telling us about. She's had some time to do some processing (though not always as much processing as she'd perhaps want you to believe). The thing about all first-person narrators is their inherent unreliability. You just can't be objective about your own experiences—not fully (and certainly not without some time and distance). So, I tried to play with that some as I constructed the novel. There are a few times when Cam claims to have come to a kind of understanding about her life, or about a particular incident, and then she later makes a conflicting statement or observation that seems to indicate something else. This isn't accidental. While Cam is a narrator who's interested in making sense of the world, and of her own experiences in that world, she's still close enough to the things she's telling us about that she doesn't have quite the perspective she wants to believe she has. The simple way to put this is that sometimes she seems to want to convince readers that she's put all of this tragedy and these difficult times behind her, but her own way of telling her story, of lingering on certain moments (or not), betrays that conviction.

I don't see her as an adult narrator looking back on her youth—she doesn't have that kind of distance, thirty or forty years. I think of her as a narrator who's maybe 19, maybe 20, so she's just a few years removed from the events she's talking about. And I think those few years of wisdom help her to at least attempt a kind of reasonable, sometimes even generous, approach when recounting her story. Perhaps, for some readers, this plays as wisdom. This doesn't mean that she doesn't get passionate or angry or lose that sense of generosity, sometimes, but I think she does try, as a narrator, to, at least occasionally, see more than one side (her side) of the experience. This is hard to do in the moment, of course, when you're passionate, and it doesn't matter if you're a teen or an adult for that to be true. When we are wronged or betrayed or wounded, it doesn't take much to start feeling bitter and petty, even if we're talking about now old wounds or old betrayals.

Cam is certainly not a perfect or pious or even necessarily moralistic narrator, but she does attempt a kind of authentic, even honest, narration, a willingness to see some of her own faults and prejudices, even while she's pointing them out in others.

KM: Do you have a favorite moment (or moments) in the story—maybe one that was particularly enjoyable to write or one that resonates with you in some way?

emd: I'm partial to a scene at the Custer County Fair, the first event Cameron ventures out to with Irene, after her parents' death. It comes pretty early in the novel. I usually just refer to it as the Ferris Wheel scene, and I often use it when I'm asked to do a reading. It's a scene rich in sensory detail, and there was a pleasure in mining my own pool of memories of that exact fair—the smells and the sights and the sounds.

And then, the Ferris Wheel itself, that slow, rotating motion, and Cam and Irene riding it together with this pile of unsaid things sitting between them, and their mutual, uncomfortable attraction—well, the tension of all that—I'm not quite sure how to put it, but thinking of that slow but constant rotation of the wheel helped me to find the rhythm, the musicality, of many of the sentences in that scene. I was also listening to the band Rilo Kiley a lot, right around the time I was writing that scene (I'm a big fan), and so it will forever be tied (for me) to one of my favorite, favorite Rilo Kiley songs, "Pictures of Success." Lyrically there's nothing in that song that would make you think Cam on the Ferris Wheel, but if you listen to the lengthy opening, in particular, the plinking music, the rhythms, it's there. I'll never be able to hear it again without thinking of Cam and Irene at the fair.

I don't, by the by, actually listen to music while I'm actively writing (I find it distracting), but I do listen to it pre- and post-writing session, and while I'm swimming (thanks to the amazing feat of technology that is the SwiMP3). I do a lot of thinking about my writing while swimming. I remember, distinctly, swimming laps to "Pictures of Success" while thinking about that Ferris Wheel scene, that entire section of the novel, really. It's a fantastic memory, one of those that reminds me how my writing process affects so many other facets of my life (and vice versa).

KM: As someone who swam competitively as a kid, coached swimming as a college student, and still participates in the sport as an adult, I am always eager to read novels that involve competitive swimming. You have depicted the sport and Cam's love for it so authentically and convincingly, I would imagine, because you were and still are a swimmer yourself. How did you get involved in swimming, and what keeps you involved in the sport now?

emd: By age three I was in swimming lessons at the same man-made lake that Cam describes in the novel (Miles City, Montana's best stab at a pool), and by five I was on a team, competing. Duck to water seems apt. Swimming is really the only sport that's ever felt completely natural to me, like a gift, something I had real ability in.

In high school and college, I lifeguarded and taught swimming lessons and even coached a couple of age group teams in both Montana and New York. Large swaths of my life—first jobs and rebellious behaviors and crushes—have been built around my relationship with swimming, particularly being outdoors, in and around water.

I no longer compete or coach, but I still lap swim with regularity. (When I can.) Everything goes better when I'm swimming four or five days a week; my writing comes more easily, I'm calmer, I sleep better—I just feel healthier, in general. And the actual time I spend in the water—down to one wall, flip turn, back—that time is always very generative for me when I'm writing fiction, especially when I'm working on something new. I contemplate character motivation or plot points while I swim. Other times it can feel more like meditation than anything else. This is particularly true, I think, with good open water swims. I've done several (the longest a 5K), and I hope to do many more. I don't think I'll ever work up to a Diana Nyad level, but I'm quite sure I'll be swimming for as long as I'm able.

KM: Sports/physical activity play a big role in *Cameron Post* (swimming, running, Christian aerobics, the Viking Erin's love of football). Why did you choose to weave sports/athletics into this story?

emd: I'm not sure that it's something I did consciously, at least if we're talking about my careful consideration of the role of sports in the novel as a whole. What I did do was think of what those interests would mean, individually, to each of those characters—Cam and the Viking Erin in specific.

Cam's both a swimmer and a runner, two noticeably solitary, you might even say lonely (if you run or swim long distances) sports, even when they're done on teams. Unless it's a relay, you swim a race, you run a race, alone, and Cam is a character who values that alone time, who uses it to both think and escape (or not think, to stop thinking).

Also, her successes as an athlete allow her to form friendships with some boys on her track team, Jamie in particular, that she mightn't have gotten a chance at, otherwise. At one point in the novel, both Cam's athleticism, and this friendship she has "with the guys," are talked about specifically by the characters themselves. It's while they're at prom. She asks Jamie if everyone is saying that she's gay—if everyone knows and is talking behind her back. He tells her no, that what they say is that she's "just a jock or whatever."

For Cam, who's not ready to come out, who's not even sure what that means, exactly, for her, this feels like a kind of comfort. There seems to be room for her to be strong and athletic without those attributes having anything to do with the way her peers perceive her sexuality. (Although, a comment like Jamie's also seems to problematically indicate that these guys are trying to come up with excuses for why Cam is strong or not feminine enough for their tastes, why she seems maybe masculine-of-center. In their eyes, the label jock is like giving her the "benefit of the doubt" that she's not this thing that would be more upsetting, more of a problem for many of them: a lesbian.)

This speaks to something I remember from my own high school experiences. If you go to a school with a strong sports program, with winning teams, much can be "forgiven" or allowed, overlooked, if you're someone whose ability contributes to those wins. Don't get me wrong, this presents all kinds of problems. I'm not advocating for this system, but it does seem to exist. Certainly it did in my school. Cam's sexuality is, of course, nothing that needs to be forgiven or excused, it just is, as she eventually comes to understand. But my point is really just that people so often see what they want to see. And if you're the student scoring the touchdowns or winning the track events, athlete or jock or "winning team member" might well be the first descriptor on the list when people are talking about you.

When it comes to the Viking Erin, well, I love her incongrui-

ties, her capacity to surprise you (or me, anyway, while I was writing her). Why not have her be a Vikings fan? Particularly because the staff at God's Promise might see that interest as too masculine—if she doesn't practice her fandom appropriately. I liked the tension there.

As for the Christian aerobics: the first time I saw a partial video of one of those workouts—someone emailed me a clip, I think—I knew that I had to work that subculture into some of my fiction. It just fascinates me that someone would see those two things (Biblical instruction and aerobics) as a natural combo for a workout video. It's even more fascinating to me that Christian aerobics has its own devoted following.

KM: Have you heard from teachers who have used *Cameron Post* in their classes? I and another faculty member plan to use your book

this semester with our future English teacher candidates ... as a teacher yourself, do you have any advice or recommendations for us or for our students as we think about integrating *Cameron Post* into our curriculums?

emd: Thank you! I'm delighted to hear that. It's incredible to me when I hear from teachers who are using this novel in their classes, and with such a variety of topics, too. (YA Lit/Fiction Writing/Contemporary Women's Lit/LGBTQ Lit, among others.)

Frankly, I've been routinely impressed when I've heard what *Cam Post* has been paired with in terms of secondary readings or discussion topics/questions. I feel like I have little to add to the smart approaches people are already using.

HarperCollins/Balzer+Bray did a fantastic job, I think, creating a Book Club guide for the novel. You can find it on my website (www.emdanforth.com, in the "Explore Cam's Dollhouse" section), or the HarperCollins Epic Reads website.

Because the guide is intended primarily as a discussion starter for book clubs, I'm not sure that it's rigorous enough to be used in the classroom (probably not in a college classroom, anyway). However, I did consult with the fantastic team who put it together, and I think the questions it asks are useful/generative ones.

I'm also interested in how/where the book fits into discussions of the traditions of the coming of age novel (particularly the American *bildungsroman*), and also the "lesbian" novel. (And what it means, of course, to call a novel a "lesbian or gay or queer" novel in the first place. How's that label decided and by whom and in what circumstances?)

When I've visited classes discussing the novel, I've witnessed a couple of interesting debates regarding the (clichéd) nature of the "coming out novel," and the ways in which *Cam Post* either maintains/embodyes or refutes (or both: maintains and refutes) those models. Personally, I think of it as a quintessential coming-of-age

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novel without thinking of it as a coming-out novel, but I'm always interested to hear how readers/students respond to/interpret it.

KM: In a 2012 interview with Malinda Lo, you noted that we tend to “other” novels with queer characters, making the LGBTQ content the novel's primary feature. For those of us who study and write about YAL with LGBTQ content, what advice do you have for us to avoid “othering” it, if that is even possible?

emd: As I recall, I made that observation while Malinda and I were specifically discussing the publishing industry and its reception (or lack thereof) of YA novels with LGBTQ characters or “content” (a rather nebulous term). There had been some relatively recent controversy regarding editors allegedly asking authors to “straighten” queer characters, or remove those characters from their (YA, in the cases I'm thinking of) novels entirely, and so Malinda asked me about my own experiences getting *Cam* published. (For the record: I never experienced anything but complete and dedicated support for this novel from my agent, editor, and entire publishing team.) Malinda and I then went on to talk about our sense of the general publishing landscape as it pertains to LGBTQ YA novels.

I'm prefacing my answer to your question with all of this background because I want to make clear that my point had to do with publishing practices and a house's lists—or, basically, what a particular imprint is publishing in a given publishing season. My concern was (is) that often, when those lists are compiled, when decisions about what will or won't be published are made, a YA novel's LGBTQ content (however that's being defined) becomes its primary identifying feature, as in, “Well, this fall we're publishing two sports novels, four romances, three fantasies, two LGBTQ novels...” You get the idea. (Though I'm not saying that the process actually looks just like that, it can sometimes seem that way from the outside.)

Which is why those, as I mentioned, nebulous definitions of just what constitutes LGBTQ “content” become so crucial—especially when such content sometimes seems to be treated as something akin to a genre by some folks in publishing (and some readers too, for that matter).

However, if you're rigorously analyzing a novel in an academic setting, using a theoretical framework, say, I don't think that's at all the same thing as othering content to satisfy (heteronormative) publishing demands or hazy “genre” conditions. The easiest way to avoid othering these novels, this content, is to consistently investigate/question how said content is being identified and defined—when, where, by whom, for what purposes (usually this will lead you to a discussion of privilege). There's so much good academic writing on this topic already, and more being produced, it seems, every day.

When a student says, even in an offhanded way, “Oh, you

know, it's a queer (or lesbian, or gay) novel about...” I usually stop him or her to ask, in as truly interested and genuine way as I can, what they mean by that. How is s/he defining the work in terms of its characters or content? Does having a queer main character/narrator necessarily make the work in question queer? Does the sexuality of the author come into play when one is judging a novel's relative queerness? How much do style and form inform a work's queerness, or do they do so at all? Is a work of fiction that is post-postmodern inherently more queer than a work of representational realism? I'm genuinely interested in the answers to those questions, and I never assume, for one second, that everyone studying the same novel will answer them similarly.

KM: In *Experience & Education* (1938), John Dewey writes, “Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (p. 25). Was your selection of the term “miseducation” for the book's title an intentional connection to Dewey? Obviously, the reparative therapy at God's Promise was miseducative, particularly for Mark; however, other disciples, including Cameron, Jane, and Adam, seemed equipped to overcome their miseducation and even thrive with each other's support and friendship. I was wondering if you might be able to comment on the idea

of miseducation and/or the importance of community (in the 1990s and today) even further.



emily m. danforth

emd: My fantastic editor actually suggested *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* as the title, once we were already a ways into the publishing process. My working title had been *Lucky Human*, which was, of course, ironic, but also referred directly to something that happens much later in Cam's life (in some material I'd written that didn't end up in

this book). We'd gone back and forth about a number of titles and they all felt wrong for various reasons. When Alessandra (said fantastic editor) finally suggested *The Miseducation of ...*—it was one that I immediately liked, that felt right and good, but I did have some hesitations. One of which was, frankly, my devotion to the Lauryn Hill album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, which I would still to this day rank amongst my top 10 favorite musical albums of all time.

Even though I knew that Hill herself had titled her album in reference to Dr. Carter G. Woodson's foundational book about cultural-conditioning, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933), it was my own associations with her album (not necessarily with Woodson's book), and its significant role in my early college life (it went in my very fancy 5-slot CD player and didn't leave one of the slots for literally two years), that made me hesitant. But I considered the term “miseducation” for awhile, I thought about

it, did some reading (came across the Dewey definition you referred to in your question), and decided that both Woodson and Carter's take (as well as any popular understanding of the term) did fit Cam's experiences well.

Yes, she is, as you observe, sometimes well-suited to handle the various kinds of miseducation thrown at her, but I think that term gets at more than just the things that happen at God's Promise (the conversion therapy center). The entire concept of heteronormativity speaks to cultural conditioning, so Cam is up against (and reacting to) a set of socially normalized protocols and beliefs long before she gets to God's Promise. In more general terms, coming-of-age, for many of us, is not only about becoming aware of the ways in which we don't buy into our parents' beliefs, or our culture's beliefs (or the ways in which we do, in fact, understand and accept those beliefs), but then also feeling confident enough to express our understanding in reasoned ways.

KM: You must receive lots of fan mail from your readers. What responses to the book from teen and/or adult readers have stood out to you the most?

emd: I'm sure most authors feel this way, but I feel so lucky to have such diverse, interested, and interesting readers. I've heard from teens, parents, senior citizens, red-staters and blue-staters, teachers, librarians, journalists, athletes, the devoutly religious/spiritual and atheists, avid readers and occasional readers. And I'm so delighted, really, each and every time a reader takes a moment to drop me a sentence or two about the book, or tweet me, whatever. It still feels a little bit like magic to me, to think of people out there reading this story, being with Cam.

There are so many good ones to choose from—like the thirteen-year-old girl who wrote me to tell me that she's decided that she's not straight, she's bent (she was happy with this personal definition—it fit for her), and that “as a bent girl,” Cam's story was so important, so meaningful. (She'd actually lost her first copy of the book in a movie theater, of all places—Cam herself would love that—and so I was happy to be able to inscribe her another).

Also, one of the very first emails I received from a reader will always stay with me. A few days after the book was published, I heard from a fifty-something husband and father of two grown children. He lived in New Jersey, had no connections to Montana. He wrote a really, really kind email about having read the NPR review online, and then, because he was intrigued, also reading the brief excerpt from the novel posted alongside the review. And (he said), it was on the strength of his interest in that excerpt alone (though I suspect that the very generous review also helped sway him), that he found himself buying, for the first time, a YA novel. And not just any YA novel, but one about a young lesbian from Montana, written by a lesbian author from Montana. As he put it, this was not the kind of book he typically read. And he loved it. He asked all kinds of specific questions about where Cam goes after Quake Lake, and suggested that I write a sequel (immediately). He was really very passionate—and it was so wonderful and unexpected to hear from him so soon after the book came out. Because of my own shortsightedness/incorrect assumptions, I wouldn't have ever imagined this particular guy as a devoted reader of this particular novel. As the kids say: my bad.

KM: I'm sure *SIGNAL* readers will want to

know what books you enjoyed reading as an adolescent. Did any of them capture for you what Cameron's story must be capturing now for so many teen (and adult) readers?

emd: I read such a strange range of stuff as a pre-teen and teen. Lots of Roald Dahl (and I would secretly return to his books, even when I felt that I'd outgrown them, which, of course, I now know, you never do). I was devoted to Choose Your Own Adventure books for awhile. Same with those paperback horror/thriller novels. (In junior high, I would read them in a single sitting, just gulping them down—three in a Saturday.)

Like so many teens, I felt a special connection with *Catcher in the Rye* (though not necessarily with Holden Caulfield, himself). I also was smitten with *To Kill a Mockingbird* (with Scout, in particular), and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Upon finishing each of those books for the first time, I remember feeling like I was older, wiser. I probably couldn't tell you how, exactly, or by what measure, but I felt changed. My junior year of high school I remember reading (and then immediately re-reading) Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*, and feeling so, so connected with (and sometimes disturbed by) that novel. It just felt so honest and, well, real—and I loved that Dolores Price (its protagonist) doesn't really “come of age” until she's in her forties. In terms of making me want to one day write novels myself, that book was hugely inspirational. As was Janet Fitch's *White Oleander*.

As far as novels with LGBTQ characters or content are concerned, I didn't have the opportunity to read very many of them, unfortunately, prior to college. (Much like Cam, as a teen, I searched for queer content—for reflections and for potential “ways to be in the world”—from films.) I did read Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* while still a teen. (I stole it, actually, from a garage sale, after reading the synopsis on the back and convincing myself that buying it would officially announce my lesbianism, which was not something I was ready to do.) I remember being simultaneously confused, scandalized, and excited by that book. I also, easily/readily, queered characters in novels. Of course George in the Nancy Drew books was gay, I told myself. Absolutely.

KM: What are you working on now? I have read that you have several hundred pages of Cameron's story already written—although you are happy to be working on other projects now. What are the chances that readers will be able to experience a continuation or extension of *Miseducation* at some point in the future?

emd: I'll answer the second half of your question, first. The truth is, I don't know, for sure, but I think the chances are pretty good. Might be several years down the line, I can absolutely imagine writing and publishing a follow-up book (and yes, I do already have material toward that end). For right now, though, I have other novels I want to write about other characters.

I am right now finishing drafting my second novel, a YA contemporary. It's been slow-going, writing while teaching full time (or not writing, as it were), and I'm finally (again) excited about this book, now that it's begun to take the shape of a complete novel. The story is told from the alternating point of view of its two main characters—Sylvan (a wunderkind writer whose first

book is being made into a movie, one that stars Audrey (a teen actress, and the daughter of a once famous, now C-list, actress). The plot primarily concerns the making of this movie—from Audrey's initial cold-read at the director's house in Hollywood to the location-shoot in Maine (this is where the bulk of the novel takes place) to the months leading up to its premiere. The movie is controversial (for all kinds of reason, too many to go into in detail), but the queer storyline, as well as a potential literary scandal involving Sylvan, add to the controversy.

Part of the pleasure of the book, I think, is experiencing some of the same moments, scenes, from both points of view, and then deciding, as a reader, if one of them feels more reliable or authentic than the other. In other words—when their stories conflict or deviate, which one is lying, or can we chalk the deviations up to simple human bias?

Because, in my novel, Sylvan's book is nonfiction (it's about the lives of boarding school girls of the early 1900s), I've done all kinds of research into that period, and much of my novel concerns now-dated-but-still-apt notions of romantic friendships between girls/women and the sometimes blurry lines that governed them.

KM: Is there anything else you would like to share with *SIGNAL* readers, who are mostly English teachers, English teacher educators, and librarians?

emd: Thank you for the important, life-changing (really) work that you do. Teachers and librarians don't get thanked enough. Most people, really, probably don't get thanked enough for the good they put into the world on a daily basis, but this is especially true of teachers and librarians. So thank you.

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