

Mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors: LGBTIQ+ perspectives

By Carmel Byrne

Snapshot

Carmel Byrne explores her school library's work to create an inclusive collection and her specific work in the area of LGBTIQ+ perspectives. The work is characterised by a willingness to involve student input in their processes.

I have titled my presentation: *Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors* to remind us of the wisdom of Dr Rudine Sims Bishop in her 1990 keynote presentation at the Celebrating Literacy Conference (Atwell and Adria, 1990). What a rich metaphor! Literature provides a mirror so we see our life experience reflected back, a window so we can learn about those who are different to us and most importantly a sliding door so we can walk into the world of others and learn empathy.

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I will outline:

- why for us in our Library creating a collection that attempts to be inclusive of all our students – whatever their ethnicity, religion, gender or sexuality – is of paramount importance
- selecting and promoting LGBTIQ+ books
- how members of our GSA (Gender and Sexuality Alliance) have been involved in how LGBTIQ+ titles are included in the collection

Since the acronym LGBTIQ+ is a bit of a mouthful, I will generally substitute 'queer' instead. I know that term may be considered a pejorative and/or be confronting but I use the term in a positive, inclusive way.

Why a library collection that includes a broad range of queer fiction and non-fiction books is important

I'll start with the Beaconhills College context. I am Head of Library at the Berwick Campus and our library caters for more than 1500 students from babies in our ELC and 4 sub schools: Junior School (P-4), Middle School (5-8), Year 9 and Senior School (10-12). It is a community based, open entry co-educational school offering a broad curriculum based on 6 key pillars: learning mindset, environment and sustainability, our global community, citizenship and service, wellbeing and

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values and character. I'm sure many of you are employed by schools with a similar philosophy so I will discuss the last two pillars in a little more detail as it may help those of you who may be in the position of having to justify having such books in their library collections and/or as part of the curriculum. To quote the Beaconhills philosophy (2021),

'Students are actively supported to build a healthy body, mind and strong sense of personal wellbeing'. Fiction, peopled by characters that you identify with enhances your sense of self and provides the opportunity to develop your identity, regardless of your gender or sexuality. If you are questioning where you fit or whether you belong, to see yourself reflected back as you read lets you know that there are many ways to be normal.

At Beaconhills, we have a student led co-curricular group, GSA (Gender and Sexuality Alliance) for students in Year 7-12. At a meeting in Term 1, I told the 25 or so students about my upcoming panel presentation (this article is an edited version of a presentation that I gave as part of SLAV presentation) and asked whether there was anything they would like to say on the topic. There were several comments along the lines of – yes books with LGBT and queer characters are needed but I thought I'd share a quote from a Year 12 member who emailed me with her thoughts on the topic:

'Books are a space designed to allow you to escape reality. And by having representations of the LGBTQIA+ community in them, they provide a comforting place for the reader, especially if they identify the same. Finding a character who represents the same as me makes me feel included, that I exist and matter, despite what society thinks. And it has helped with discovering my identity growing up'.

School libraries provide safe physical spaces for all students, especially the vulnerable ones. Our collections provide a key extension to that space. Books with diverse characters provide that **mirror** to our queer students – making them feel like they count, that they belong. In addition, going back to the metaphor from Dr Rudine Sims Bishop, these books also provide a **window** for heterosexual students to learn more about what it can mean to be queer and possibly a **sliding glass door** so they may walk in the shoes of another student and learn empathy.

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This brings me back to the sixth pillar of learning at Beaconhills – values and character – 'The College values of *Respect, Compassion and Integrity* guide students to develop their character and identity' (2021). Reading this article, you may be under the impression that Beaconhills is an inclusive community where all embrace diversity in all its forms. This is not the case but I am pleased to say that we have made a good start. Very occasionally a parent in the school community will question particular books with queer characters and themes and/or Library displays such as one we created for 2019 Wear it Purple Day. When a parent questions, the

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response of the College is along the lines of our core values of respect, compassion and integrity are non-negotiable. If we respect all members of our school community, we will provide a diverse library collection.

In an edited extract, titled, 'I never found myself in a book : Patricia Grace on the importance of Māori literature' in *The Guardian* on 1st May this year, we find a persuasive argument on the importance of inclusive literature, particularly '#own voices'. She writes that the stories put before us

'show what is important, or not important to a particular group of people at a particular time'. 'If there are no books that tell us about ourselves, but tell us only about others, that, makes you invisible in the world of literature. That is dangerous'.

'If there are books about you but they are negative, demeaning, insensitive and untrue, that is dangerous'.

When we feel as though we count, that we belong, that we matter – we want to participate, we want to make a contribution. Conversely when we feel excluded or worse still if we are discriminated against, are bullied as if we are in some way broken or sinful, there are horrendous consequences for individuals, families and society.

It is hardly surprising then that queer students are more likely to disengage at school, are less likely to do as well as they could academically are more likely to experience mental health issues including depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. The shocking statistics are readily available online for anyone needing more evidence (2021 update, 2021).

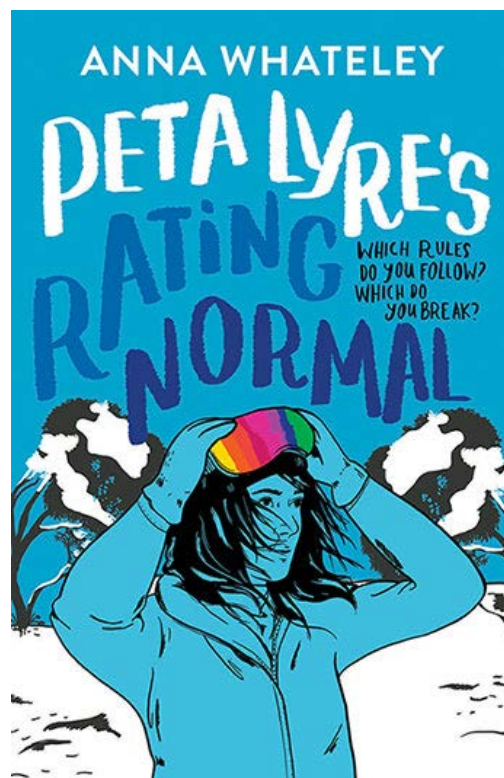
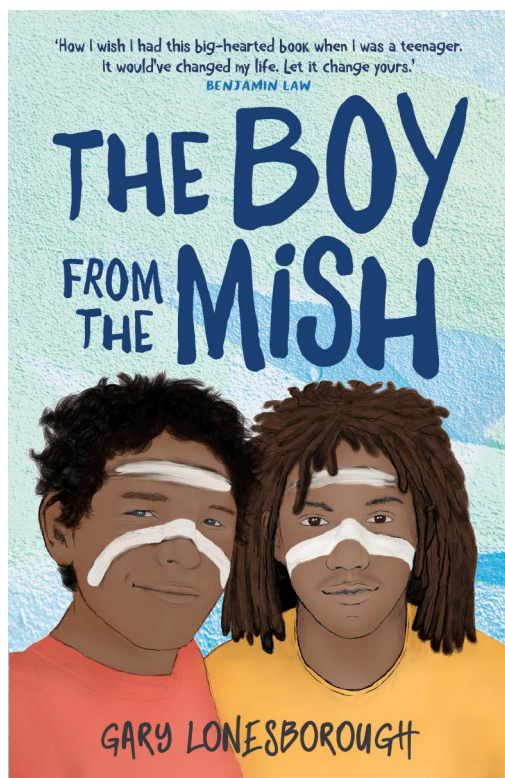
If more arguments are needed for the 'powers that be' at your school in order for you to include books for all students regardless of gender or sexuality, they can be referred to the Australian and Victorian laws that require schools to take reasonable steps to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status and to promote an inclusive school environment (Safe Schools, 2021).

Now for the **What** – there are lots of great books for our queer students being published here and overseas. If you want to get started, don't agonise – the only mistake you can make is to do nothing. Your queer students will notice and will recognise your efforts. Who knows, you may even get some verbal feedback expressing that they enjoyed the book or a request to get more in that series or more books like that in the library!

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A few aspects to consider though: support Australian authors and publishers. If we want local content, especially from queer authors, we need to buy and promote their books and there are some very wonderful books being produced by these authors. Some great examples are:

The Boy from the Mish, by Gary Lonesborough, *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* by Anna Whatley, *Underdog*, edited by Tobias Madden, *Ida* by Alison Evans, *Night Swimming* by Steph Bowe and Nevo Zisin's memoir – *Finding Nevo*.



Perhaps when you think of books for queer students, you think of novels where the main character is questioning their sexuality or perhaps that have worked that out but want to 'come out' to their parents and/or friends. While these novels, along with queer romance novels and stories are important to add to your collection, these readers will relish a contemporary, science fiction, fantasy, action, horror or some other genre where the main character is queer.

One of the things I loved about Anna Whatley's, *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* is that when our neurodiverse protagonist is rating how normal she is, her relationship with another girl is not relevant! Another Aussie great example that comes to mind is the winner of the 2019 Gold Inky Award: *Amelia Westlake* by Australian author, Erin Gough. While it does contain romance and a deeper layer, it is light-hearted and funny and very popular with a broad range of queer and straight students in our library.

If any of your students and/or staff are 'out' to you, ask them for recommendations of books that might be appreciated by other students. Keep an eye out for recommendations from your bookseller, reviews in the media and relevant people that you may follow on social media such as The Knack on Facebook.

Where and How?

At Beaconhills, at both campuses, our fiction is shelved alphabetically by author within its genre with a genre label on the spine. Back in the days before we had a GSA, after discussion among Library staff, I talked to students who were 'out' to me about having a LGBTIQ+ genre label or possibly shelving these titles in one collection. At the time, the consensus was 'love is love' so

why shelve it separately and if other students see us looking at or borrowing books from that section, we will be embarrassed and we might be bullied. Creating a separate collection would also likely limit non queer or straight students from borrowing these books.

So, the decision was made to add LGBTQI as a subject heading when cataloguing and to shelve each book within its genre. I am not sure whether students at your school consult the library catalogue when it comes to looking for a book they might like to borrow, but at Beaconhills, students generally browse the shelves and the displays unless they are looking for a particular title and even then, they are more likely to ask a staff member at the circulation desk to check the catalogue for them. The subject heading is helpful for staff assisting students and/or staff to find appropriate titles.

Now that GSA is up and running and becoming more popular, I decided to consult with the stakeholders and they were keen to add a relevant sticker but what sticker and where to place it?? After much discussion they recommended a rainbow flag sticker – they decided not a rainbow heart because as they said – it’s not all about romance, is it? And where to put the sticker – some thought the spine but then it came back to possible embarrassment for some students. So, they decided inside the back cover on the edge away from the spine so they could take a discrete peek!

When the rainbow flag stickers arrived from Quantum Library supplies in Queensland (it was the only supplier that I could find who stocked them without a special print run), the students in GSA jumped at the chance to help with the stickering when I asked for assistance. This had the added benefit of promoting this collection and there was lots of discussion about various titles and special favourites.

Where to from here with LGBTIQA+ literature at Beaconhills?

A recent exciting development is that our Year 9 & 10 English teachers are looking at changing English texts for 2022 and asked me for recommendations. They were keen to move away from books by ‘dead white guys’ that they find have little relevance or interest for most students and wanted me to include contemporary titles by diverse authors for their consideration. Two of the titles that they have expressed possible interest in are ‘*Peta Lyre’s Rating Normal*’ by Anna Whatley and ‘*The Boy From the Mish*’ by Gary Lonesborough.

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