

## **The Rainbow Library at Umeå City Library and The Swedish Network for LGBTQ Issues at Libraries**

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### **Abstract**

*The commitment to LGBTQ issues at the Umeå City Library. The situation for LGBTQ people in Umeå and Sweden and why we have launched this initiative and how we at the Umeå City Library have worked with The Rainbow Library on the web and on Facebook, and with The Rainbow Bookshelf.*

*Presentation of the national network for LGBTQ issues in Swedish Library Association, which we started 2012, as well.*

**Keywords:** The Rainbow Library, The Rainbow Bookshelf, LGBTQ, Umeå

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### **Introduction**

In January 2012 we decided to make a major commitment to LGBTQ issues at the Umeå City Library. We are going to tell you a little about the situation for LGBTQ people and why we have launched this initiative and how we at the Umeå City Library have worked with The Rainbow Library on the web and on Facebook, and with The Rainbow Bookshelf.

We will also present the national network for LGBTQ issues in Swedish Library Association, which we started this year, as well.

LGBTQ is short for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. Queer is a broad term that can mean many different things. Queer could be anything that is outside of the heterosexual norm.

## **Background**

It is essential that all human beings have a sense of belonging to a society and feel like they have a home. This is even more important when you belong to a minority or a subculture.

We are living in exciting times. The dominant heteronormative perspective has recently been called into question. Laws are being enacted that make who we chose to live our lives with irrelevant. In some parts of society, it is no longer taken as a given that everyone is heterosexual and LGBTQ groups have become a critical driving force.

However, we still live in a society that holds heterosexuality as the norm, where many of us are not valued for who we really are. To achieve equality in the society, we have to fight for the rights of all groups at the same time.

As long as there are people in society who are not considered valuable citizens, the vision we have of a truly democratic society has not been reached.

(From RFSL's web site. The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights)

## **International Perspective**

All people should be able to enjoy all the human rights described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet millions of people across the world face execution, imprisonment, torture, violence and discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

## **Sweden**

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) rights in Sweden have been regarded as some of the most progressive in Europe and in the world. Same-sex sexual activity was legalised in 1944 and homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness in 1979. Sweden became the seventh country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage countrywide in 2009.

Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression has been banned since 1987. The Equality Ombudsman (DO) is the government authority that works against homophobia and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. DO also works against discrimination on the grounds of gender, including gender identity. Also, since 2003, gay and lesbian couples can adopt children, and lesbian couples have had equal access to IVF and assisted insemination since 2005. Sweden has been recognised as one of the most socially liberal countries in Europe and in the world.

Our city Umeå, was once called the most gay friendly city in Sweden. It was some years ago and still you rarely see same-sex-couples walk hand in hand or give each other a kiss, in the city of Umeå. Especially in the north of Sweden there is almost silent about LGBTQ, and LGBTQ people are pretty invisible. Lesbians, gays and transgenders often move to bigger cities like Stockholm. Maybe it feels more comfortable and safe to live in the anonymity of a big city, and of course it is easier to meet other LGBTQ people there.

In a Swedish survey young people said that a lot of their mates have a negative attitude towards homosexuals. Words like gay and lesbian are used as terms of abuse.

Being an LGBTQ person often involves some invisibility. To be in an environment where people over and over expresses how bad it is to be just what you are, is of course very destructive.

## **LGBTQ in the Library**

At the library it is obvious that everyone should feel welcome, but in the attempt to welcome everyone, the normality is often presented, and everyone does not feel welcome in the normality.

For example when the library exhibits books for Valentine's Day and all the books only speak of heterosexual love, it's not only a bit boring for non-heterosexuals; it might be experienced as very unwelcoming. Non-heterosexual love and LGBTQ people consequently become invisible.

It is vital to acquire stories and words to define yourself and to reflect yourself in. Especially for LGBTQ people it is important to find role models and stories that confirm the right to be who you are or want to be.

The Swedish author Jonas Gardell describes in his books 'Never wipe tears without gloves' how seeking information or stories about homosexuality could be, in the silent '80s:

*If you were gay, young and insecure and wanted to find something, even the smallest thing, to identify with, you had to sneak into the library in Arvika\*. Then, when you were sure no one saw you, you could search among the shelves labelled "Medicine" for confirmation in the books, confirmation that you existed!*

*When you sat there squatting with a pounding heart, trying to read about yourself, reading the words "morbid" and "deviant", reading the words "miserable," "corrupt" and "perverted", reading the words "vicious", "abnormal", "disgusting" and "unwanted" - you welcomed all of these words, because at least they confirmed that you existed and that there were others who were just like you.*

\*Arvika is a small village in Sweden

LGBTQ culture has for long been invisible and LGBTQ people have been made invisible or have had negative attention. Even if it is not the same stigma around LGBTQ issues as before, the community is still very heteronormative and LGBTQ people are often excluded.

We believe it is important that the library should state clearly that LGBTQ people are seen, included and valued as customers and borrowers.

## **The Rainbow library**

Umeå City Library started The Rainbow Library in 2012 because we want to work with the inclusion of LGBTQ persons and fight discrimination and homo- and transphobia. Highlighting the queer broadens the perspective and therefore provides a higher quality of our library. The Rainbow Library is a concept that includes a web page, a Facebook page, program activities and The Rainbow Bookshelf.

## The Rainbow Bookshelf

When we decided to raise LGBTQ issues at Umeå City Library, we felt that we should have a special shelf that highlights LGBTQ literature. The shelf should be a positive mark in the library. A shelf where anyone interested can find various media with LGBTQ themes.

When we had the opening of The Rainbow Bookshelf 2012, we received many greetings and best wishes from all over the world. The author Håkan Lindqvist wrote the following to us:

*Discovering stories about someone who has found something that I myself seek, is a certain kind of good luck. Sometimes I find the story by accident and other times someone might suggest that I should read this particular book, or look at this particular shelf. Perhaps the story becomes a signpost for me, for the steps I want to take or a help when I face a choice, big or small. There is a special kind of happiness to recognise oneself in a story, to feel involved in the story, to realise that I am not the only one with this particular dream.*

Many of the greetings we received to The Rainbow Book Shelf gives a feeling and perhaps an explanation of why we should work with inclusion of LGBTQ people and the importance of highlighting books and other things with LGBTQ content.

The shelf doubles the LGBTQ media standing on their regular shelf. We think it is important to have the LGBTQ media placed both in the Rainbow shelf and at its usual position, to avoid discrimination and to reach all potential borrowers. The Rainbow Bookshelf shall not drain the rest of the library on LGBTQ media. The shelf is supposed to be a complement with duplicates.

We try to have a mixture of happy positive stories and more problematic stories. We want the shelf to give a positive joyful feeling without belittling the problems that exist. On the shelf we have Swedish and English books. Right now we have about 450 volumes and we want the shelf to grow. We receive suggestions to buy LGBTQ books via Facebook and on the library website.

On the shelf we have:

- Picture books, fiction books and chapter books for children
- Biographies
- Leaflets in different languages
- Fiction
- Film
- Audio books
- Poetry
- Cartoon books
- Literature for adolescents
- Journals for adults

The primary target groups are young and adult LGBTQ people and children in LGBTQ families. But of course, we hope that the shelf will reach many interested visitors. It will also raise the general level of knowledge and the quality of culture for people outside the primarily target group.

There are a lot of countries where it is illegal to have a rainbow bookshelf at the library. We think because of that it is even more important, to have this bookshelf and mark that human rights are worth fighting for.

The Bronski Beat singer and gay activist Jimmy Somerville gave us this greeting:

*Gosh, how I remember searching many a shelf looking for something that would educate, entertain, inform or reassure this 'Smalltown Boy'.*

*So to know there is a shelf that has been prepared, is waiting, inviting and proud for anyone who needs to discover its wonders.....woooohooooo!!*

*Please woooohooooo!*

*VERY LOUD!!!*

*He he!*

Jimmy Somerville

When we had the opening for The Rainbow Bookshelf in the autumn 2012, we did our best to advertise it. We sent press releases and invited people. We had an actor who read out the greetings we received. We had music and theatre. Speeches were made by RFSL's chairman of Umeå and The Head of Library in Umeå.

The Rainbow Bookshelf unveiled with cheers, balloons and drum rolls. We printed special Rainbow Bookmarks to have in the shelf and to send to schools and other libraries.

Jack van der Wel the manager for IHLIA, Internationaal Homo/Lesbisch Informatiecentrum en Archief, Netherlands / International gay/lesbian library, archive, information and documentation centre, gave us this greeting:

*I trust that the 'Rainbow shelf' will be an important instrument to make books, films and magazines with LGBT-content more visible to the public of the public library. In the Amsterdam Public Library we have a "Pink Case". It clearly meets a need for LGBT-people and youth and for the general public. Visibility of LGBT-life is very important for developing attitudes of acceptance toward LGBT-people. Public Libraries can play an important role in achieving this goal. Best wishes!*

The Rainbow shelf, at Umeå Library, has been a success. About 30 per cent of the media is always on loan. There are often people around the shelf looking in our magazines and books. We are getting a lot of positive remarks from our visitors. Many libraries in Sweden have shown interest in our work and created their own Rainbow Bookshelves. It feels good being copied.

### **The Rainbow Library on our Website**

We collect events, reviews, articles and other things LGBTQ on our website 'The Rainbow Library'. LGBTQ are visible both in the web site's mainstream and on The Rainbow Library site.

## **The Rainbow Library on Facebook**

We also have a Rainbow Library page on Facebook. We post news on The Rainbow Bookshelf, share tips and communicate with borrowers. We get LGBTQ book recommendations from borrowers here, as well.

## **Activities**

LGBTQ is a part of our regular program activities at the library. For example, we have had story time with Rainbow-stories for children, a lecture on same-sex marriages and a lecture about the project Queering Sápmi. We enjoyed a visit from the author Mian Lodalen, who was talking about her book *Tiger*, a self-biographical story about growing up as a lesbian in a small city in the south of Sweden.

The photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin has been talking about her projects, and showing photos. In her works she often photographs LGBTQ people. She is most famous for her exhibition *Ecce homo*, which portrayed Jesus among homosexuals and transgender people.

Another time we had a lecture and a film screening together. First the filmmaker Josefine Tengblad talked about making the film *Kiss me!* And after that we saw the film.

This spring we had *Blondes and Brunettes*, in the library, a portrait exhibition of transgender people, made by the photographer Kerstin Ekström. The exhibition wants to remind us about each individual's right to choose their own life. We also had a lecture about the Swedish lesbian poet Karin Boye's life, with some of her poems performed by a singer.

## **Partners**

In order to make The Rainbow Library as good as possible, we have partnered with groups in Umeå who are working with LGBTQ issues.

- RFSL, The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights.
- The transgender association FPES Full Personality Expression Sweden.
- The Queer Administration, Umeå, a cultural group.

We have several of our programs during Umeå Pride, and even throughout the year.

## **Swedish Library Association Network for LGBTQ issues at the library**

In January 2012 we started a network for LGBTQ issues in Swedish Library Association. We meet once a year and are about 45 members, from different libraries in Sweden. All members in The Swedish Library Association are welcomed to discuss issues related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer issues from a library perspective.

The network wants to raise the libraries LGBTQ competence and discuss how to include LGBTQ people in the library. The library should be able to show that everyone really are welcomed and included.

Especially young LGBTQ people and those who, for various reasons, conceal their sexuality need to feel the support from the community. The network will also highlight the general quality improvement as a high LGBTQ competence provides the library.

The network will also work internationally through networking and communication with libraries in other countries, perhaps especially in countries where LGBTQ people are oppressed or discriminated against, censored or other prohibitions.

The network's move to raise the issue of everyone, visitors and staff, the right to feel welcome and included in the library, regardless of sexuality or perceived gender. Then those who live outside the heterosexual norm can be counted as a disadvantaged group, it is certainty that the library takes responsibility and works for an obvious inclusion. It is part of our popular education, promotion of culture and democracy promotion mission to work for individuals of equal worth and to fight prejudice and discrimination.

RFSL's Chairman Ulrika Westerlund sent these words:

*What a fantastic initiative with a Rainbow Bookshelf!*

*I have seen many Rainbow Bookshelves over the years, but often it's usually temporary during a certain week. By providing a permanent shelf you show that LGBT lives and experiences is not something that should only be seen during a special time of year but always be included.*

We have chosen to work like this. Of course, there are many different ways to raise these issues in libraries. The key is perhaps not always what you do, but to do something.