

I Read You Loud and Queer

Brittany R. Jacobs

MSLIS Graduate Student, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

E-mail address: BRJ3@illinois.edu



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Abstract:

Libraries serve as cornerstones to healthy and engaged communities, which in turn feeds to a healthy and engaged society, but housed within the walls of these institutions of information are invisible barriers that further perpetuate the schisms that divide and suppress society, specifically when it comes to the LGBTQI+ community. Nowhere is this more evident than in the children's department of US public libraries. Picture books make up a large portion of the book market, yet queer books and characters are near non-existent. The few that do make it to the shelves are almost always challenged or banned and are near impossible to find as irrelevant and misleading subject headings are used for cataloguing. Enraged citizens have taken it upon themselves to write, illustrate and publish their own queer books for children, however due to lack of professional know-how, sub-par books are released which mimic the second-class status of the queer community.

Information professionals can champion for inclusive and positive subject headings, host events such as Drag Queen Story Hour and help parents and care givers read queerness into the text. A look at current programs and libraries that are engaged along with best practices are offered to empower and encourage information professionals, specifically those that work with children and youth. A staff that feels confident in providing spaces, collections and events that encompass the LGBTQ community will increase their social capital and strengthen their relationship with the community as a whole.

Keywords: Queer, LGBTQI+, Picture Books, Social Justice, Children's Services

Donning a pair of treacherous six-inch go-go boots and a pink dress reminiscent of the 1950's housewife, a shimmy and a shake queue the band to start the beat. Story time has begun. The book: Green Eggs and Ham by Dr. Seuss. The audience: 50+ families (adults and children) from the greater Philadelphia area. The storyteller: Martha Graham Cracker. Hailed as Philadelphia's top drag queen, Martha is one of the best and most sought-after live performers currently on stage. The parents are excited to see Martha, while the kids are eager to hear a favorite book. Despite the already established queerness of this story hour, an added component of distinction is layered on top as Green Eggs and

Ham is not read aloud by Martha, rather it is sung. Needless to say, this is a queer story time, in every possible sense of the word. But does one need an acclaimed drag queen (or king) to queer their picture books? Is queerness in children's literature relegated to the back corner where the pathetically few in number and overtly queer in nature (and subsequently banned and challenged) books are kept? It was these kinds of questions, and the fact that - as fabulous as it would be - Martha cannot read for us all, that drew me to analyzing children's picture books with the rainbow tinted lens of queer theory.

In order to begin, we must first establish who the intended user group of story time books are. Take a moment, and ask yourself: who are picture books for? If you said children, you're only partially right. Technically speaking, U.S. picture books are primarily made for children ranging in age from 3 to 8 (sometimes 9) years-old. However, it is adults that write, illustrate, publish, purchase, interpret and read these books aloud. The 3 to 8 year-old bracket is a transitory stage for children, on a variety of levels, including literacy. At the beginning of this spectrum you have completely illiterate toddlers, and on the opposite end you have beginning readers. Though the older ones can indeed read, the verbiage used in picture books is often beyond their competency, hence the necessary adult interaction with the text and child.

In addition to the literacy transition happening in this time of a young person's life, they are also absorbing a large amount of behavioral and social cues that they will carry on with them into adulthood. With the challenges that face parents, caregivers and teachers when it comes to raising a child, picture books are often turned to as a tool for developing literacy awareness as well as moral and social behaviors. "In early childhood, the separations among different spheres of functioning are not yet firmly established, and young children come only gradually to distinguish clearly between dreams, fantasies, and waking states, between the self and others, between a picture and the thing pictured. Thus, the artifacts presented to them make a deep and lasting impression" (Spritz 2-3). Having experienced the power of picture books myself, as a listener, reader, and writer I know first-hand how deep and long-lasting those impressions can be.

As mentioned earlier, picture books are largely geared towards adults and it is for this reason that I chose to approach my search as an adult browsing the catalog via OPACs (online public access catalog). I wanted to know what kind of results I would get if I were a parent, caregiver, or teacher searching for queer books for young children. Two library OPACs were used for this research, one suburban (Naperville Public Library) and one urban (Chicago Public Library). Initially, I did a keyword search using the term "queer," but this brought up several issues. Thanks to Franklin W. Dixon's liberal use of the word as an adjective for the mysterious islands and caves that the Hardy boys set out to examine, this keyword search brought up a plethora of hits. Moving on to "gay" I ran into a similar problem with prolific author Marie-Louise Gay's name bringing back dozens of hits. Not that I was afraid that the Hardy boys were digging around "lesbian island" or that there was an author by the name of Jean-Luc Bisexual, but more so because I wanted to cut out the fluff and get to the meat of the matter, I switched over to the subject search.

Using the word "queer" as a subject search brought up zero results in both library catalogs. I then tried "homosexuality" garnering four hits at Naperville and seven at Chicago. The term "LGBTQ" came back with one hit at Naperville and five at Chicago. Working my way through the LGBTQI identifiers (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex) I was shocked to find that the Naperville system had a grand total of 16 books, with the Chicago system faring a bit better at 59 titles.

Subject Term	Naperville Public Library	Chicago Public Library
Queer	0	0
Homosexuality	4	7
LGBTQ	1	5
Lesbian	2	8
Gay	4	16
Bisexual	0	0
Transgender	2	2
Intersex	0	0
Gender	3	21

In the sea of possibilities that are picture book collections, to find so few among the stacks can be extremely disheartening, for “representation is not simply a reflection of how things are in the real world, but a creation, production and regulation of the world of possibilities” (Harding 54). To be denied that representation is terribly demoralizing, not to mention the intense feeling of exile that comes with it. To make matters worse, of the top thirteen titles that came up at both locations (meaning they were fairly accessible) three of them appeared on the American Library Association’s (ALA) frequently challenged list, two more had authors that were on the list for other titles (banned for their queer nature), and a whopping eight of the thirteen were challenged or banned at one point.

Why are there so few picture books that reflect the queer community? Is it because there are no queer picture books? No. It’s because books are left to the mercy of the cataloguers who classify them, and because of this we are left with broad subject terms such as, “bedtime” or “security” or worse yet, “alternative lifestyles.” Not only are there so few books out there, but it becomes a massive needle in the haystack style search due to the out of date, offensive and unrelated subject headings attached to each title. “In defining the problem of classification and cataloging queerly, the solutions themselves must be queer: built to highlight and exploit the ruptures in our classification structures and subject vocabularies, inviting resistance to rather than extension of the coherent library systems that a critical cataloging movement for correctness upholds” (Drabinski 97).

Another key factor for the lack of accessibility to queer books is the bias embedded in collection development librarians. If the librarian in charge of purchasing doesn’t want to include queer or controversial books, then they simply won’t. The same can be said about librarians who refuse to display such books. For many, their fear of controversy is a legitimate concern, as ramifications for backlash from patrons could be budget cuts. Other possible reasons for a lack of displayed queer books may be that the librarians are unfamiliar with such texts, or if they are aware then they may simply be uncomfortable with the subject matter. This type of behavior based on personal feelings/beliefs is a manifestation of Bourdieu’s *habitus*; “the process of how individuals shape their views of themselves, the wider society, and their place in the social world through subtle, often unconscious, inculcation of the family, the education system, local and regional society, and interactions within and outside of their social class” (Hussey).

Now, let’s say by some stroke of wild luck an adult was able to find and check-out a few queer titles. What they will (most likely) have before them are second-rate and poor quality items. Why is this? To answer that we must take one step beyond the shelf, and enter the publishing house.

Publishing in general, but especially with children's picture books, is a money making business of the most massive sort. Picture books are released at rate of up near 20,000 titles per year, due to the 32/48 page limits and fast turn-around times (12-24 months) for the authors and illustrators. Picture books such as *Go the F*ck to Sleep* are given as gifts to new parents while Dr. Seuss' *Oh, The Places You'll Go* is a popular college graduation gift. There is a picture book to give for every imaginable celebration, they're bought in bulk by schools, libraries and community centers, and can be translated relatively quickly for a global market. All of that to say, if an editor doesn't think that a book will sell then they won't publish it. It's obvious by the results from my searching that most editors have erred on the side of financial caution and rejected the queer manuscripts. Small houses, with less resources, and less to lose tend to be the ones publishing books that pose a financial risk in addition to the possibility of challenges and banning from the public. Due to the lack of resources, the books that these smaller houses put out (though well intended) are visibly lacking when held up next to their traditionally trade published, binary and heteronormative neighbors. "In fact, the books themselves, the physical artifacts, collude in the muted emotional register of the text. Produced under financial constraints that favor undistinguished illustrations and unimpressive book design, gay-themed picture books embrace their limitations, allowing the book to support the ideological message, 'Nothing overly appetizing or fun here'" (Huskey).

Thanks to the onset of digital crowdfunding websites such as [GoFundMe.com](https://www.gofundme.com) and [Kickstarter.com](https://www.kickstarter.com) paired with the user-friendly self-publishing business, making a picture book has become a viable option for anyone with a hint of an idea and a compelling fundraiser campaign. The majority of people self-publishing are neither professional writers or illustrators, which gives us a sub-par story and pictures that lack in cohesiveness and quality. The second-rate nature of these books mimics the second-class citizenry of the queer community.

Regardless of the "less-than" stories that the outside packaging of these books are conveying, what are the actual stories taking place on the inside? Going back to our list of most accessible queer books, seven of the twelve involved queer adults with a (presumably) heteronormative child. "What these books must avoid at all costs is any affect that might activate the pernicious myth of recruitment" (Huskey). To avoid such a myth the child plays the role of majority (heterosexual) bridging the gap between themselves and the "others" (homosexuals). This brings up two problems. First, children relate and connect to other children. To read books where the adults play the queer roles, does little for the child who identifies as queer. Sure, Heather has two mommies, but Heather is the connecting character and she exudes the white, heteronormative qualities that are rampant in the majority of picture books. Second, this underlying, homonormative current in queer books is a point of contention with many. In his article, "U.S. Children's Picture Books and the Homonormative Subject" Nathan Taylor goes so far as to claim that giving adults these roles and by "having to justify their actions" gives children, the "unmarked heterosexual(s)" more power than the adults.

In addition to pointing out where the social power structure lies, Taylor goes on to point out the homo-normativeness of queer picture books. Of the books mentioned earlier that relegate queerness to the adults, they all feature (presumably) monogamous couples with marriage being a strong if not, main, theme of the story. Another disturbing revelation from Taylor is the lack of diversity represented among the queer community. "By giving recognition and privilege to some lesbian and gay people, but not to all queer people, these texts create cleavages within the queer community - a divide and conquer tactic, so to speak" (Taylor). "This suggests a hierarchy of identities that tends to exclude less clearly defined and popularly available ones, such as bisexual or transgender" (DePalma). The fully intersectional and oppression-busting picture book that Taylor is idealizing is non-existent. It is not possible, not with the current publishing executives in charge anyway.

As I am writing this, off in the distance I can hear the sound of drums. It's up and coming authors, illustrators, editors and publishers marching to a new beat, and it's starting not with sexuality, but with gender. "Though one might think of such a term [queer] as simply relating to sexuality, the emergent use of the term 'queer' also indicates radical notions regarding gender" (Smith 61). Historically, in the U.S. gender has been very binary. You're either male or female, and the pressure to

live up to your given gender is incredibly heavy. Gender reveal parties are the signifying start of influenced gender pressures and rituals. There is nothing natural about assuming that dress-up is a ‘girly activity’ while building or roughhousing are “boyish” in nature. These are stereotypes, rituals and learned behaviors are passed on from generation to generation. “Binary gender also creates a paradigm that culture has come to read as ‘normal’, as natural, rather than as constructed” (Rabinowitz 6). Rather than perpetuating this cycle of a forced (and false) binary system with picture books like *Fancy Nancy* for girls and *Bob the Builder* for boys, new books are emerging that tackle those preconceived gender behaviors. In 2016 *Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story About Gender and Friendship* was released (albeit via a crowdfunding campaign) that gives Teddy a lead AND queer role.

As an iceberg only reveals the top percentage of its bulk, so it is with subject and keyword searches for queer picture books. What does it say about world famous and award winning books such as *Goodnight, Moon*, *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Strega Nona* to know that they were all written by people who identify as queer? In order to qualify as a queer text, do the subject terms and content have to be overtly queer? I would argue, that they need not be.

“There’s no shortage of queer picture books if you’re looking in the right places, or with the right eyes. For while foregrounding homosexuality, whether deliberately or in flight, robs the picture book of its queerness, seeking it where it “isn’t” establishes it most fully” (Huskey). Once you start looking beyond the queer subject terms and content, then you’re free to begin exploring the queerness that resides in plain sight. One way a text is made queer is to be authored and/or illustrated by a queer identified person. Remy Charlip is quoted as saying, “if people knew who was gay in the children’s book business they would be surprised.” Why then are they not writing or illustrating queer characters into their works? This most likely goes back to what we discussed about the publishing business. To make a living by making children’s books you must make books that actually sell, and we’ve already discovered that queer books just don’t have the same market value as their non-queer counterparts... yet. In the case of Maurice Sendak, most well known for his best-selling picture book of all time, *Where the Wild Things Are*, he wrote in non-binary characteristics to his characters. To reveal the queerness in his books one must simply take note of the characters breaking stereotypical gender behaviors.

In the case of author/illustrator Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad* series, does Lobel’s interpretation of Frog and Toad’s relationship have an effect on the reader’s interpretation? In other words, though not explicit in language, if Lobel viewed Frog and Toad as a gay couple does that mean the reader will also? For many, no. They choose to view the pair as two (albeit odd) friends. However, when you view the text through a queer lens then a queer relationship between the two amphibians is afoot. “By stepping outside that interpretive circle that needs homosexuality to be normal, and which consequently must render it as abnormal, we enter the connotative realm, the elusive, impossible-to-deny because impossible-to-prove world of implication” (Huskey).

All of this to say, the greatest way to queer a picture book is through your interpretation of the text and illustrations. While singing *Green Eggs and Ham* Martha Graham Cracker comments on the mannerisms of Sam — mannerisms that are traditionally female in thought, were now open for all. As Sam struck a pose, so did Martha, and so can you. “Through these mediators’ involvement in helping children learn to navigate the world of literature, new approaches to seeing the queerness of gender in children’s literature could be used to encourage new reading strategies. The more awareness adult readers have of the structures, pressures, and assumptions being made about gender in children’s books, the more they can help children to develop a critical awareness about these issues, and to actively form their own opinions and reading strategies” (Rabinowitz 5).

“Literature helps shape children’s experiences, intellects, imaginations, feelings, and thoughts, so what books they have access to and how those books are presented is an essential area of study” (Epstein 288). It is because of the power that comes with early literacy experiences that I chose to apply a queer lens to picture books. At first glance, queer picture books seemed like an endangered

book species, and those that I did find were trembling behind shoddy book designs cowering in the stacks for fear of more challenges, banning or even (in some extreme cases) burning. However, there are librarians, authors, illustrators and editors that are championing for change and lighting a path for a new wave of queer picture books to be ushered in. Until then, we can take solace in knowing that “queerness flourishes in children's texts without permission, without sanction, even without recognition. The challenge we face is liberating that queerness from the heterosexism that polices our reading--both silently, to ourselves, and out loud, together” (Huskey). It’s up to adults to help interpret the texts in a way that dismantles the established gender biases and helps to draw attention the inherent queerness in us all. Imagine how life-affirming it would be to take the words of a wildly racist and hetero-normative author/illustrator, Dr. Seuss, and reinterpret them through a queer lens to tell children of all identities; “You are you. Now isn’t that pleasant.”

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