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Library Outing

Revisiting Lesbian and Gay Collection Development

Library collections strive to reflect the communities they exist within, and in this effort, they often also reflect, be it intentionally or unintentionally, the prejudices and stereotypes of society. Thus materials on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered peoples, who are often marginalized in American society, often also are excluded from library shelves. To consider the causes of the relative absence of LGBT materials on library shelves, I revisited a previous paper I wrote on collection development and access of LGBT materials.¹ Additionally, I also consulted an article by Sasha Alyson, founder of Alyson Publications, an LGBT publisher,² and a chapter from the book *Gay and Lesbian Library Service* written by Cal Gough, who established the Library Information Clearinghouse of the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Task Force.³

In a survey of 141 lesbians in North Carolina, Alisa Whitt found that many of the participants were disappointed in the lesbian materials held by their libraries and in their

¹ Lori Ann Saeki, "Outing the Library: Lesbian and Gay Collection Development and Access in Public Libraries," student paper, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Fall 2003.

² Sasha Alyson, "What Librarians Should Know About Gay and Lesbian Publishing," in *Alternative Library Literature 1984/1985*, ed. Sanford Berman and James P. Danky (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1986), 114-115.

³ Cal Gough, "Gay and Lesbian Materials in Public Libraries," in *Gay and Lesbian Library Service*, ed. Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1990), 38-58.

library's service to them as patrons.⁴ In a similar study of gay men in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Steven Joyce and Alvin Schrader also found that many of their participants found the Edmonton Public Library's collections and the ability to access them lacking⁵. Both studies found that during the coming out process, lesbians and gay men were likely to see the library as a significant source for information, but negative experiences during these early stages often led these women and men to not return to the library when seeking lesbian and gay materials later in their lives. Thus, as Cal Gough argues, a librarian's decision to not acquire materials that deal with LGBT issues will directly affect — even insult and damage — some 10 percent of the library's patron base at their most vulnerable time.⁶

The most basic problem that often leads to a lesbian or gay patron's dissatisfaction with a library is its collections and the amount and quality of LGBT materials in them. In a checklist study of 136 public libraries with holdings listed on OCLC, Patricia Loverich and Darrah Degnan found that even some of the larger libraries held few to none of their sample of 33 titles which had been finalists for the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Book Award for the previous decade⁷. Previously, James Sweetland and Peter Christensen conducted a checklist study of the OCLC Online Union Catalog for a sample of lesbian, gay and bisexual titles and found that these books were purchased by fewer libraries than were titles in a control group⁸.

⁴ Alisa J. Whitt, "The Information Needs of Lesbians," *LIS Research* 15 (1993): 275-288.

⁵ Steven L. Joyce and Alvin M. Schrader, "Hidden perceptions: Edmonton Gay Males and the Edmonton Public Library," *Canadian Journal of Library and Information Science* 22 (1) (April 1997): 19-37.

⁶ Gough, 57-58.

⁷ Patricia Loverich and Darrah Degnan, "Out on the Shelves? Not Really," *Library Journal* 124 (11) (June 15, 1999): 55.

⁸ James H. Sweetland and Peter G. Christensen, "Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Titles: Their Treatment in the Review Media and their Selection by Libraries," *Collection Building* 14 (2) (1995): 32-41.

Sweetland and Christensen selected titles for their study from a combination of Lambda Book Award finalists and books reviewed in *Lambda Book Report*, and in a survey of Illinois public librarians, Catherine Ritchie found that most librarians used three major reviewing publications – *Booklist*, *Library Journal* and *Publisher's Weekly* – for selection, and used other, lesser known publications, such as *Lambda Book Report*, infrequently⁹. This is reinforced by Alex Spence's checklist survey of holdings of libraries from the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, which found that the lesbian and gay children's books most commonly held generally received the most mainstream reviews¹⁰. Thus, many small factors can lead to a reproduction of heterosexism in collections that seem inadequate to lesbian and gay patrons; even if a library does not have an explicitly homophobic person in charge of acquisitions, as many lesbian and gay titles, particularly fiction, are printed by small publishers and may not be reviewed in mainstream sources,¹¹ lesbian and gay books may go unnoticed by librarians. Heterosexism thus is already built into the process that many selectors learn in library school, often leading to the systematic reproduction of heterosexism in collections.

Because traditional selection methods could lead to librarians to miss many quality lesbian and gay materials, Gough offers alternative techniques that require different amounts of work for locating items to help build an LGBT collection. Perhaps simplest would be to browse the shelves to find LGBT books already in the collection, and consulting their bibliographies or recommended reading lists. Similarly, a selector can search another library's catalog or OCLC's WorldCat to see what LGBT titles are

⁹ Catherine J. Ritchie, "Collection Development of Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual-Related Adult Non-Fiction in Medium-Sized Illinois Public Libraries," *Illinois Libraries* 83 (2) (Spring 2001): 39-62.

¹⁰ Alex Spence, "Controversial Books in the Public Library: A Comparative Survey of Holdings of Gay-Related Children's Picture Books," *Library Quarterly* 70 (3) (July 2000): 335-379.

¹¹ Alyson, 114-115.

held by other libraries, and treat those as a sort of recommended reading list. For more recommendations, librarians could also consult with people who work at local lesbian and gay bookstores to find out what their customers are buying, as these titles will likely also be popular among potential patrons. Librarians can also request catalogs directly from lesbian and gay publishers such as Alyson Publications or Naiad Press; while these likely will not offer the helpful critique that an objective review could, they will allow librarians to see the range of publications and issues addressed by the LGBT press (and come with handy ordering information). Also helpful are subject bibliographies, many of which are available through the GLB Task Force's Library Information Clearinghouse. Librarians should also build relationships with the folks at their local LGBT community center — this will come in handy not just for book recommendations, but will also help improve access to the growing LGBT collection, as the library and the center can later work together on themed displays, events, and other outreach activities.¹²

Traditional approaches to materials selection in libraries, such as consulting reviews in major reviewing sources like *Publisher's Weekly* or *Library Journal*, can often result in books dealing with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered issues and themes being overlooked by selectors. By allowing this, libraries implicitly reproduce heterosexist systems of discrimination and deny their patrons the opportunity to freely access information about issues facing approximately 10 percent of the population. Thus, though it may take a little extra work, librarians should engage in alternative selection strategies to help build a collection that embraces and informs all of their institution's potential patron base.

¹² Gough, 40-43.