

SECOND EDITION

LGBTQIA+ BOOKS for Children and Teens

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INTRODUCTION

How Can I Support My LGBTQIA+ Population Today?

Are you feeling overwhelmed trying to pick out diverse books for your collection? Are you worried about the rise in book challenges, especially against books with LGBTQIA+ topics, themes, and characters? Are you having trouble figuring out which books have different types of representation? If so, then congratulations, because you've come to the right place—those are exactly the types of problems this book aims to solve.

In this book, we are giving you the information you need to make your selections. Each book entry contains the complete title, author and illustrator, publisher, and date of publication, plus a note on what type(s) of LGBTQIA+ representation the book contains (see *Decoding the Alphabet* on page xi). Each book annotation shares what the book is about, and Conversation Starters provide opportunities to discuss the book. We show you where to find positive reviews of the book, with journal designations for starred titles. We also have responses from authors that explain not only why they write for children but what they feel teachers and librarians should understand when working with queer children and their classmates.

The book's six chapters follow the age range of readers:

- **Chapter 1**, “Ch-ch-changes!,” covers some of the current crisis in book challenges and bans, how books for LGBTQIA+ readers are affected, and the effect such measures have.
- **Chapter 2**, “Books and Conversation for Young Readers,” deals with a child's sense of self in their family and their larger community. It presents picture books that show all kinds of families, including those with parents and children who are not considered gender normative by conservative communities.

- **Chapter 3**, “Books and Conversations for Middle Grade Readers,” focuses on books with young people who are questioning and finding themselves while searching for where they belong. It includes chapter books of varying lengths and with characters who are dealing with all the changes of middle school.
- **Chapter 4**, “Books and Conversation for Younger Teens,” shares books that touch on mental health and other issues that develop as youth start high school.
- **Chapter 5**, “Books and Conversations for Older Teens,” shares books that touch on housing insecurity and other issues that impact older teens.
- **Chapter 6**, “What Teachers and Librarians Can Do to Support LGBTQIA+ Students,” shares action steps and best practices, as well as things that you can do in and for your community.

In this second edition, we focus mostly on current publications, from 2020 to 2023, because so many wonderful and worthy LGBTQIA+ books have been published in the past four years. A few from the first edition are still included; for example, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, which has had two editions so far. It was a groundbreaking book when it was first published and is still relevant, and challenged, today. When discussing touchstone books that helped to pave the way for today’s LGBTQIA+ literature, we mention several classics but do not list or annotate them in the appropriate chapters. (Some of these are out of print but may be available at your library.)

EMERGING AND CHANGING TERMS

So much has changed in our vocabulary over the past few years, including the transition from using the acronym GLBT to using LGBTQIA+. The more accepted the community becomes, the greater the diversity in terminology, as people are able to be more open about and share their differences. This has resulted in more specific definitions, as we move from simply using the terms *gay* or *straight* to *gay/lesbian* to *gender identity* and *sexual orientation* and more; each term is acceptable and distinct. Instead of being overwhelming, this variety in terminology is our opportunity to allow for diversity in and individualization of gender identity. As you read through

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DECODING THE ALPHABET

We abbreviate LGBTQIA+ representation types using the following definitions. When multiple identities are represented, we try to note the most prevalent representation first.

A asexual and/or aromantic	B bisexual	G gay
GNC gender nonconforming	I intersex	L lesbian
Nonbinary* nonbinary		P pansexual
Q queer and/or questioning	T transgender	2S two spirit

*This one is not abbreviated because *NB* is already used by others to signify “non-Black” when referring to people of color.

this book's chapters and annotations, know that we explain these terms, and more, in the glossary. Because language is fluid, these terms may change, and we are sensitive to that; we are choosing to be as inclusive as possible.



Author/Contributor Biases

Readers may notice that we have not necessarily included all expected titles; because this volume contains annotations for our selected titles, we are limited to what books we and our contributors have read. Additionally, some representation categories may be larger or smaller than the percentage of books one might expect to see in that category; again, title selection is based on what we have read. For example, Kathleen is a teen librarian who is asexual and nonbinary and so will more often choose to read titles in those categories (teen/young adult books, books with asexual characters, books with nonbinary characters). This does not mean that those are the only books that Kathleen reads, but it does mean that Kathleen most likely reads a higher percentage of books that have asexual characters than they do books with characters of other sexualities. Liz is a retired school librarian and adjunct instructor of literature for children. She is a cisgender ally. Her choices of books to review are picture books and middle grade titles.

FOR

Ch-ch-changes!

More LGBTQIA+ books for children and young people are getting written and published, and more are coming from authentic voices. They continue to evolve and show a broader spectrum of LGBTQIA+ characters, both primary and secondary, and they all reveal the depth and variety of people and families today. That is the good news. The bad news is that book challenges have risen exponentially, especially for titles that represent the LGBTQIA+ community. Yet despite these threats, it is more important than ever to build collections that include these books. Librarians, teachers, and other professionals who work with children and young adults need to provide open discussions about these titles. Our spaces should be safe, warm, and welcoming for all children.

WHAT CHILDREN NEED

“It’s incredibly important for an LGBTQ student who is being bullied in school and doesn’t have support from their family to see that there are people in the world who are also LGBTQ and are thriving,” says Alice O’Brien, general counsel for the National Education Association. “It’s lifesaving for them. And the same is true for students of color. They need to see their experiences validated and reflected in the school curriculum and in our school library.”¹

COMING OUT IN THE PAGES: HISTORY OF LGBTQIA+ CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Today, we are finding quality picture books written about a variety of family structures with which all children can identify. Books for young adults have taken a similar path, one just as bumpy, with many challenges and issues. Even before we had literature classified as YA (young adult), there was a novel, *Chocolates for Breakfast* by Pamela Moore, first published in 1956, whose thirteen-year-old main character had a crush on her female teacher and a relationship with a bisexual man. This eye-opening book dealt frankly with issues about questioning one's sexual identity during the coming-of-age years.

Here are other examples of published books that offered windows and mirrors for children and young adults in the early 2000s. All have been challenged.

Rainbow Boys, written by Alex Sanchez and published in 2001, is the first in a series of books about high school boys who are frankly facing their homosexuality and everything that goes with it. AIDS, gay bashing, homophobia, and other topics are explored in this realistic fiction title.

Boy Meets Boy, written by David Levithan and published in 2003, called by some a "gay utopia," is the story of what life would be like at a school where everyone is gay. There are normal teen issues, but no angst about being gay. This delightful story is a great way to show that we may all be different, but we are also the same.

King and King, written by Linda de Haan and illustrated by Stern Nijland, published in 2003, finds the prince uninterested in the potential brides his mother parades by, as he has a prince in mind.

Luna, written by Julie Anne Peters and published in 2004, was the first YA book about a transgender character. Although they were called Liam by day, the main character did not really come alive until nighttime when they became Luna, decked out in beautiful dresses and makeup. Deciding to share Luna with their family and friends comes about through a voyage of self-discovery.

And Tango Makes Three, written by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell and illustrated by Henry Cole, published in 2005, is a new and different way to present gay parents based on a true event at a public zoo. Although this book was the most challenged from 2005 to 2009, it had a second printing in 2015.

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Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, written by Alison Bechdel and published in 2007, is a graphic memoir that details Bechdel's life from childhood through college. During this time, she navigates the twists and turns of realizing she is lesbian while being raised by her closeted gay father, who runs the town funeral home. This is a unique recipe for a story, especially a true one, and it is told through a graphic novel, which was turned into a Broadway show.

Two Boys Kissing, written by David Levithan and published in 2013, has characters sharing an extended same-sex kiss because they are trying to break the Guinness World Record. The book is also notable because the story includes a chorus. It shares a heartfelt perspective and even a brief history of homosexuality.

None of the Above, written by I. W. Gregorio and published in 2015, became the first YA book to deal directly with the issues surrounding intersex people. Written by a doctor who also writes fiction, this story deals with a popular high school girl who seems to have everything. After a problem with her boyfriend, she visits her gynecologist and learns that she is intersex. Woven into the story is factual information about intersex organizations and medical treatments for intersex issues.

Maia Kobabe on the Watershed Moment in LGBTQIA+ YA Literature

[A]s a teenager in the early 2000s, the librarians at my library would make those little bookmarks with suggested titles and put them in different sections of the library, including a whole bookmark with queer titles, that they would then leave in the teen section. And I remember finding one of those as a teenager, and thinking, "I'm going to read every single book on this list," and I believe that I probably did, because there was a lot less queer YA available in 2003. There was, like, *Annie on My Mind*, and there was *Boy Meets Boy*, and there was *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters.² . . . 2003 was kind of like this real watershed moment of queer YA, and after that moment, there were so many more available. I was in eighth grade that year, so I feel like I was perfectly placed to receive that watershed of queer books that were then being published. Especially, here's the thing, before then,

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there were queer teen books, but they were all sad, they all had these tragic endings, often the queer character died, or was disowned by their family, or just had something really bad happen to them, and after that moment, there [were] people writing happy, lighthearted, more whimsical queer YA, and I feasted on those books, any queer book I could find. —MAIA KOBABE³

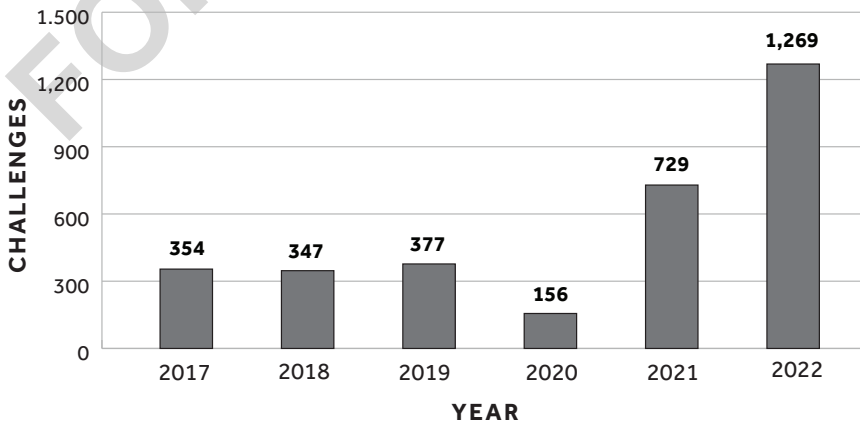
DEALING WITH OBJECTIONS

We look to see ourselves reflected in books, and we gain empathy by reading about people who are different from us. Unfortunately, book challenges and bans continue to impact books with queer content at a heavy rate, and such challenges “can actively harm teens for whom queer books serve as mirrors,” says Karis Rogerson, writing for *We Need Diverse Books*.⁴

Challenges to materials were made at an alarming rate in both 2021 and 2022. After a relatively steady few years, the Office for Intellectual Freedom at the American Library Association reported 729 challenges or bans in 2021 and 1,269 in 2022.⁵ PEN America did a nine-month study, which they then extended to a full year, of bans in school libraries and classrooms and found similar results.⁶ Figure 1.1 shows just how sudden and extreme the increase in bans and challenges to books has become.

FIGURE 1.1

Reported challenges by year, from the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom



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Voices from the Stacks

Noah D. Mullens

I am a PhD student who studies LGBTQ+ Children's Literature. Before that (very before that), I grew up in a rural town with a small library that had no palpable queer presence. I did not identify as gay at the time, nor would I be allowed to engage with gay books. I felt a draw to certain novels over others to fill this void. These books, albeit trashy or flashy, gave me something that children's books did not. Put simply: I was the stereotype of the kid who read only "adult" novels (think V. C. Andrews or Stephen King).

Now flash forward. The kid who read adult novels is now the adult who reads children's literature. In my studies I find LGBTQ+ children's books that range from the rich and incredible to the narrow and didactic. Nevertheless, the essential trait of these books is that they are fruitful and that they multiply. Kids in libraries can roam the stacks and find new and exciting books that show something I thought was beyond belief.

Even so, it is risky to be too utopian; the accessibility of these books is under attack through "new" bans. But these books have always been under attack. The title of this book is proof that LGBTQ+ books are windows into the lives and experiences of people. I propose that they are also mirrors that remind us to never take progress for granted. That kid in a rural town still exists; it's just about finding a way to reach him.

Authorities challenging, banning, and burning books is not new. Historically, these bans and burns have been led by religious and governmental leaders. One need not look even a century in the past to consider the efforts of the German Nazi Party in looting and burning the contents of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin in 1933, or the government of South Africa banning anti-apartheid materials from the 1950s. Even more recently is Russia's "gay propaganda" law, banning any information on LGBTQIA+ topics, which was signed in 2013.

In the United States, books have been challenged, for various reasons, since before it was even a country.⁷ Recently, though, challenges and bans

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have been escalating. According to *Banned in the USA*, PEN America’s Index of School Book Bans “highlighted the disproportionate targeting of books by or about people whose identities and stories have traditionally been underrepresented in children’s and young adult literature, such as people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, or persons with disabilities.”⁸ They looked at book bans only in school libraries and classrooms in the United States and only within a nine-month span (July 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022). Despite the short time frame, they index “1,586 instances of individual books being banned, affecting 1,145 unique book titles.” Even worse,

41% (644 individual bans) are tied to directives from state officials or elected lawmakers to investigate or remove books in schools. . . . [B]ook banning, as a form of censorship, implicates First Amendment prohibitions on the ability of government entities to ban or punish expression, making these documented efforts by lawmakers all the more concerning.⁹

Maia Kobabe, author of *Gender Queer*, which has been the subject of numerous challenges, bans, and an attempted lawsuit in Virginia, makes stark the connections between book challenges and bills restricting rights for LGBTQIA+ people:

I think it is a very organized effort to erase trans and queer and non-binary voices from the public sphere. And I see it as linked to also the rise in bills trying to limit access to trans healthcare, and limit the rights of trans athletes and trans students to access various activities and sports in school. I see it as a very dangerous and upsetting effort to make it harder for trans people and nonbinary and queer people to live.¹⁰

Of particular note for this volume, the PEN America Index notes that in the full yearlong look that they took at book challenges and bans in classrooms and school libraries, they found “2,532 instances of individual books being banned, affecting 1,648 unique book titles,”¹¹ with 674 (41 percent) titles that include LGBTQ+ themes or characters. Of the 262 titles we include in this edition, 92 (35 percent) have been targeted in those bans. The top two titles on their list, *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe (challenged in forty-one

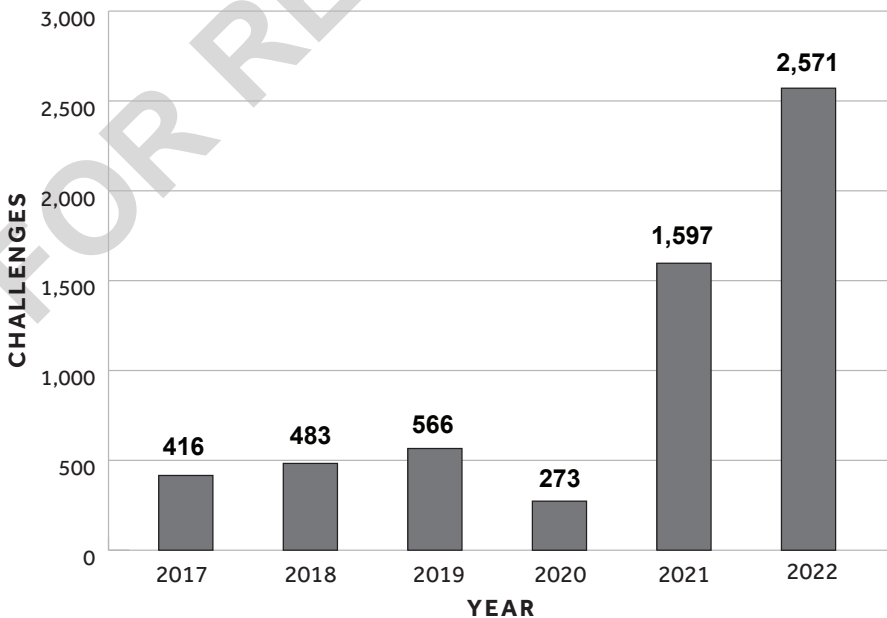
districts) and *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson (challenged in twenty-nine districts), are included in this edition, and of their top nineteen titles, eight have LGBTQIA+ content (42 percent). Looking at their list of the top forty-six banned authors for this period, we include at least one book by twelve of them (26 percent).

The Office for Intellectual Freedom at the American Library Association notes similar troubling cases. After a large dip in 2020 due to schools and libraries being mostly closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, book challenges and bans surged by more than 360 percent (see figure 1.1), and titles impacted increased by almost 500 percent, as shown starkly in figure 1.2. Of note,

half of the American Library Association's top 10 list of most challenged books in 2021 concern queer identity, and the three most challenged books—*Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison, and *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson—all fall in this category.¹²

FIGURE 1.2

Reported titles challenged by year, from the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom





Authors Speak Out on Book Bans

“Removing or restricting queer books in libraries and schools is like cutting a lifeline for queer youth, who might not yet even know what terms to ask Google to find out more about their own identities, bodies and health.”—**MAIA KOBABE**¹³

“Hiding the beautiful range of humanity from young people does not keep young people from being themselves. Instead, it makes the road for queer and trans people to find ourselves harder and more damaging, and leaves a large majority of cisgender people who don’t know us, and therefore are much more likely to read, and hurt us. Positive representation saves lives.”—**ALEX GINO**¹⁴

“Kids are the same everywhere. There are depressed kids everywhere. There are isolated, at-risk kids everywhere. There are LGBTQ kids everywhere. Getting rid of books from the library won’t change that; it will just make life that much harder and more isolated for those children. . . . The truth is that like it or not, some kids are gay. Some kids are trans. To make the world safer and better for them, we need to have representation of those people in books. Books with LGBTQ characters save lives. I know because of the hundreds of emails I’ve received from kids who have told me my books saved their life.”—**BILL KONIGSBERG**¹⁵

“We have an issue in this country, specifically when it comes to young adults, that we assume that there are topics that are too heavy for them to read or to understand. I am not a believer of that. . . . There is this belief that if we keep these things away from the youth, that they won’t indulge in them, when the reality is [that] us keeping resources, and us keeping these stories, away from them doesn’t stop them from going through the same situations. It just means that they don’t have the knowledge or the education to handle those situations in a way that can be best suited for them.”—**GEORGE M. JOHNSON**¹⁶

Though more common in the past, children are still often discouraged by well-meaning adults and other professionals from discussing family situations and their own gender identities. Every child deserves to feel represented, valued, understood, and welcomed. Without these books, we lose the opportunity to explore and understand these issues in ways that will build empathy. These books are written to examine the issues of understanding, empathy, acceptance, and respecting inherent human rights. They are written not only so that LGBTQIA+ youth do not feel invisible or of less value but also so that straight, cisgender youth can feel empathy and gain an understanding of their classmates and friends.

So if we agree all children need exposure to LGBTQIA+ books and honest, open discussion, how do we deal with stakeholders who disagree? Begin by taking a look at your collection, library, or classroom, and ask the following questions:

- Do you have a variety of fiction and nonfiction titles that explore LGBTQIA+ themes?
- Do you have titles with diverse secondary characters that offer a realistic mix of people one might expect to find in a group?
- Are there titles written on a variety of reading and interest levels?
- If they are genrefied, are these books blended in with their genres or do you have a separate section?

Though there's validity to both approaches, we'd argue that unless you separate out books with topics related to other forms of diversity (race, ethnicity, class, age, etc.), then don't form a separate section for LGBTQIA+ books.

Why share LGBTQIA+ literature with all children? Because, we argue, it's an issue of fundamental rights—rights that all of us deserve. We no longer hesitate to share books about other forms of diversity: race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, language, women's issues, and more. Why are we still hesitant to share books about sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and nontraditional family structures with all children?



Authors Speak Up for Book Inclusion

Arguments for the inclusion of these books in libraries and curricula for all children come from a wide variety of sources. Gene Luen Yang, author of the Printz Award–winning young adult graphic novel *American Born Chinese* and the fifth National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature named by the Library of Congress, had this to say at a conference a few years ago: “Books themselves are ambassadors . . . books can be advocates. . . . This is why we need diverse books [as they] teach kids to love others [and act as a] moral foundation.”¹⁷

Books can be good advocates, but they can also be actively harmful if they portray a negative or stereotypical view of LGBTQIA+ children. Rudine Sims Bishop, an enduring voice in the field of diverse children’s literature, writes:

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.¹⁸

This makes it even more important for books that reinforce a positive, valuable image for children and young people to be readily available and accessible. Characters like Julián (*Julián Is a Mermaid*), Max (*Call Me Max*), and Violet (*Love, Violet*) can show that being different and proud of oneself is wonderful.

Therefore, accurate and inclusive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals in picture books serve as positive role models with whom LGBTQ children can connect . . . , letting them know they are not alone, and provides them with a broader understanding of themselves (mirror) and others (window).¹⁹

WHERE LIBRARIANS FIT IN

Librarians—school, public, and all other types—still face the stereotypes of being old fashioned, out of date, and nonprofessional, when nothing could be further from the truth. We’re truly a strong group of professionals

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who take our patrons' needs and interests to heart and are willing to fight for them and their rights. We hope the tools we include in this book will further your resolve to ask the questions that help promote understanding and empathy about LGBTQIA+ issues with all children at a time when it's crucially needed.

Banning and challenging books does not impact only readers whose identities are reflected in the books being banned. PEN America notes,

The move to ban both fiction and non-fiction books dealing with diverse characters and experiences—including racial, ethnic, and religious identities; gender identities and sexual orientations—reflects a backlash against attempts to bring a more diverse and inclusive set of voices and perspectives into the curriculum. This impacts students with these identities who may feel excluded; but also the opportunity for all students to learn about differences.²⁰

Rogerson quotes Lee-Ann Gill, a teen librarian:

The book challenges and the book banning—what it says to the teens, who may identify with those books, [is] that they are banned. That they should be challenged, not allowed to be who they are. Not able to be themselves. [That] it's not normal, it's not okay.²¹

And Erika Long, a library consultant in Tennessee says, “It’s part of the teen experience, or adolescent experience, to experience a kiss. But that doesn’t make it obscene just because it involves two boys or two girls.”²²

And maybe most simply and directly put by author Kelly Barnhill, “If you change the narrative, you change the world.”²³ So, let’s all take the prickly path and begin to change the world.

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