Out of the Closet but Not on the Shelf: Initial Findings from a National Study of Librarian Censorship of Award-Winning GLBTQ Teen Titles

Robin Fogle Kurz, PhD
SLIM at ESU
OUTLINE

• Why It Matters
• Recent Studies of Censorship & Self-Censorship
• The Study
  • The Books
  • The Libraries
  • The Initial Findings
• Next Steps
A MATTER OF LIFE & DEATH

- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 24. [1]
- LGB youth are 4 times more likely, and questioning youth are 3 times more likely, to attempt suicide as their straight peers. [2]
- Suicide attempts by LGB youth and questioning youth are 4 to 6 times more likely to result in injury, poisoning, or overdose that requires treatment from a doctor or nurse, compared to their straight peers. [3]
- Nearly half of young transgender people have seriously thought about taking their lives, and one quarter report having made a suicide attempt. [4]
- LGB youth who come from highly rejecting families are 8.4 times as likely to have attempted suicide as LGB peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection. [5]
- 1 out of 6 students nationwide (grades 9-12) seriously considered suicide in the past year. [6]
- Suicide attempts are nearly two times higher among Black and Hispanic youth than White youth. [7]
- Each episode of LGBT victimization, such as physical or verbal harassment or abuse, increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average. [8]
RECENT STUDIES OF CENSORSHIP & SELF-CENSORSHIP
RECENT STUDIES

• Censorship
    • Of 63 challenges from 2001-2015, 25 were for books depicting “homosexuality.”

• Censorship & Self-Censorship
  • In August, PEN America released *MISSING FROM THE SHELF: Book Challenges and Lack of Diversity in Children’s Literature*:
    • Challenges and bans “disproportionately affect books by or about people of color and LGBTQ people, limiting children’s access to books that accurately reflect and depict a wide range of individual identities and experiences.” (p.5)
    • “Many librarians, teachers, and school administrators freely admit that they decline to order certain books out of fear that someone might find the content objectionable.” (p. 12)

• Self-Censorship
  • SLJ’s 2016 Controversial Books Survey:
    • Increased percentages of “declined to purchase,” labeling, restricted sections, etc. since last survey in 2008.
THE STUDY
OVERVIEW

• What triggered the study?
  • “Used” books

• National look at various public library collections using IMLS data and online catalogs to see if there are commonalities in libraries holding (or not holding) award-winning GLBTQ titles for teens
  • Far less easier than it sounds!
THE BOOKS

• Started with all the titles from Stonewall youth categories and Rainbow List from 2010 to 2016 award/list years (copyright dates ~2009-2015)

• Added additional filter for other ALA awards and lists with goal of each book having at least 2 non-GLBT recognitions from ALA divisions or rounds tables.

• In the end, the awards and lists on the right were used:

  - YALSA
    - Amazing Audiobooks
    - BFYA
    - Great Graphic Novels
    - Morris Award/Finalists
    - Printz Award/Honors
    - Odyssey Award/Honors
    - Outstanding Books/College Bound
    - Popular Paperbacks
    - Quick Picks/Reluctant Readers

  - SRRT
    - Amelia Bloomer List
IN OTHER WORDS, BOOKS LIKE...
OTHER 23 TITLES

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda
I Am J
The Darkest Part of the Forest
Beauty Queens
Beautiful Music for Ugly Children
The Miseducation of Cameron Post
If You Could Be Mine
Better Nate Than Ever
Five, Six, Seven, Nate!
Sister Mischief
Almost Perfect
See You at Harry's
Personal Effects
Huntress
Proxy
Shine
October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard
Tomboy: A Graphic Memoir
Punkzilla
Carry On
Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe
Grasshopper Jungle
Pink
THE LIBRARIES

• 512 total public libraries (> 10% of U.S. public libraries serving between 5,000 and 1,000,000 users, based on 2014 IMLS data, using American Library Directory for sample)

• Initial random sample did not include at least 5 libraries from each state, so further, randomly selected libraries were added until this threshold was met.
  • Hawaii and DC were not included due to public library structure and population size.

• Some libraries were eliminated if they did not have online catalogs. If needed, another library was added as a replacement to keep each state at minimum of 5 libraries.
THE INITIAL FINDINGS

• A lot of variables potentially influence whether library held titles:
  • Service Population Size
  • Presence of MLS/MLIS-holding librarian
  • Collection Budget and Collection Expenditures Per Capita
  • Geographical Region
  • Urban/Suburban/Rural designation
## BY CENSUS REGION AND MLS/NO MLS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>MLS</th>
<th>count</th>
<th>Avg pop</th>
<th>avg mat budg</th>
<th>avg titles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I-Northeast</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>26,957</td>
<td>$ 99,120</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-Northeast</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9,759</td>
<td>$ 30,809</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-Midwest</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>39,516</td>
<td>$ 214,031</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-Midwest</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10,007</td>
<td>$ 27,882</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III-South</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>82,733</td>
<td>$ 173,690</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III-South</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14,280</td>
<td>$ 26,594</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV-West</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>77,936</td>
<td>$ 290,325</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV-West</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17,592</td>
<td>$ 35,302</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
UNUSUAL DISTRIBUTION OF TITLES?

Number of libraries with $n$ titles
OTHER OBSERVATIONS

• Often libraries would be missing only the “Queer” book by a particular “mainstream” author
• There were libraries within the same state with similar budgets and population sizes that had vastly different numbers.
• The books themselves:
  • Top 3: I’ll Give You the Sun (74%); Drama (73%); Carry On (72%)
  • Bottom 3: Sister Mischief (14%); Punkzilla (22%); Pink (22%)
  • What?!? Aristotle & Dante (won Belpre Award, Printz Honor, Stonewall Award, and on BFYA) only at 63% and many libraries had no Sáenz books, even in Texas!
NEXT STEPS
MOVING FORWARD

• Expansion of search to more libraries, especially those with shared catalogs

• Another search of the libraries serving 10,000+ with less than 15 titles and “control” group to titles without GLBTQ content and/or non-Queer titles from current authors

• Survey/Interviews with staff in libraries with low numbers of these titles
HAPPY TO ANSWER QUESTIONS AND SHARE DATA

@robinkurz
robinfoglekurz@gmail.com