

# Rob Bittner presents: LGBTTIQQ<sup>2</sup>AAGU (aka non-hetro) fiction

By Rachel Yaroshuk.

## Rob Bittner at Burnaby Public Library

After packing a full house at the BC Library Conference back in May, Rob Bittner agreed to do a follow up presentation on LGBTQ in young adult (YA) fiction. The BCLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC), Young Adult and Children's Services section (YAACS) and the LGBTQ Interest Group coordinated a two hour session with Bittner at the Burnaby Public Library on Tuesday, September 20th.

Bittner's presentation was both engaging and provocative, taking a big picture approach to LGBTQ fiction concerns, hopes, and realities.

## A Look at Terminology

Bittner started out by clearing the air, discussing LGBTQ terminology. (More information can be found at the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [website](#).) He discussed both affirming and derogatory terms for LGBTQ and touched on the complex re-appropriation of historically derogatory terms.

For the purpose of his presentation, he used the term "queer" to include all identities outside of the heterosexual norm, noting that while this term was once seen as derogatory it has since been re-appropriated, and is now a generally accepted term, as well as a school of academic inquiry.

To make sure everyone was on the same page, Bittner discussed different ways of understanding gender identity with a simple yet powerful model – the "Genderbread Person" (Killerman, 2012). Working with this playful model, Bittner explained the complexities of gender identity, orientation, expression and sex that fall somewhere between the masculine-feminine, heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy.

With this established framework, Bittner proceeded to share a list of his favorite queer YA and juvenile books. He distinguishes the two age categories stating that the earlier readers are focused on gender identities, while YA fiction focuses on sexual identities.

Even though there is currently more of a focus on YA sexual identities in fiction, both gender identity and sexual identity are important in establishing awareness and understanding of alternative orientations. For each book introduced, Bittner provided a brief plot synopsis and explained why he endorses the specific titles.

## The Publishing World

During his presentation, a question arose regarding potential YA queer periodicals available for libraries. It seemed that there were few library appropriate periodicals. Bittner suggested that this is because publishers aren't ready to commit to regular publications on this topic. He did recommend a variety of online spaces to find queer support, such as [genderfork.com](#) (Genderfork, 2012).

On the topic of publishing, he shared the history of queer fiction. While historically queer fiction has seen little focus, author Malinda Lo (2012) inquired and noted a significant increase in material published on this topic post 2000's. Although most of the publishing active in this area is independent, Simon & Schuster has been leading the way for big name companies publishing queer literature.

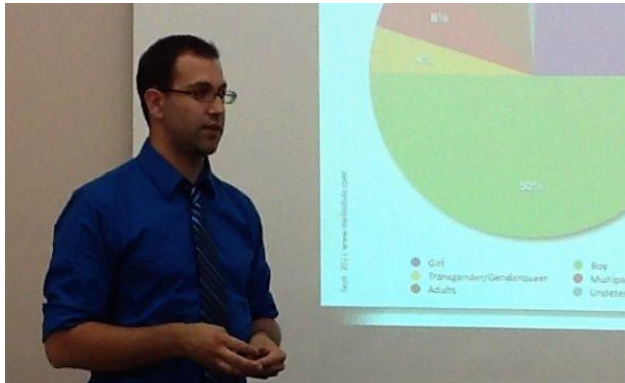
In addition, Lo's work broke down queer literature by story type. She noted that approximately 50% of literature on queer topics related to the gay characters, 25% related to lesbian characters (Lo, 2012), and the remainder were unevenly distributed between transgender, genderqueer, multiple, and undetermined characters.

The gay representation is much greater than any other queer identity. Bittner attributes the predominance of gay characters to market demands.

He suggests that heterosexual female may fantasize about a gay relationship, while heterosexual males do not fantasize about a lesbian relationship in the same way. By relationship he refers to a romantic storyline, as opposed to a solely physical interaction. This, compounded by the general reading statistics where teen girls often read more fiction than teen

boys, may attribute to the high statistics of gay LGBTQ YA literature.

Despite the fact that LGBTQ YA still takes up a significantly smaller chunk of YA fiction than the non-LGBTQ, these recent statistics prove that publishers are producing queer material. While some publishers are still refusing LGBTQ characters and topics, there is a general growth on this subject matter within publishing.



Rob Bittner presenting at Burnaby Public Library.  
Photo by Nathan Pachal.

### A Glance Forward

Moving forward, Bittner discussed how characters are assumed white until proven otherwise. He noted a study from Kate Hart (2012) that suggests 90% of cover art featured whites. While this is true in all fiction, it also means that there are few inter-racial couples modeled in queer YA literature.

Bittner anticipates that, over time, these sexually diverse characters will grow to become more dynamic and complex, expanding beyond their sexual identities to include the additional dynamics of inter-racial couples or varying levels of mental and physical ability.

Bittner also anticipates seeing an increase in sexual diversity beyond the dominant LGBTQ gay and lesbian coupling. He was very excited to introduce the new YA novel titled *Above* by Leah Bobet, as one of the first intersexed characters in a YA fiction book. He looks forward to reading more books on intersex characters in the future.

Bittner has once again provided a wealth of information on queer YA literature, both in topic discussion and book recommendations.

We look forward to further insight from him in the future as he pursues his PhD at Simon Fraser University in the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies.

For more details, the full presentation can be found on Youtube:

Part 1:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1cZzDHraCQ&feature=context-gau>

Part 2:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uG2cqQPTyIs&feature=context-gau>

### Works Cited

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