

# Vetting LGBTQI Children's Books with Love

by Maya Gonzalez

I estimate that to stand in equitable reflection in the children's book industry, LGBTQI authors and artists need to produce approximately 380 books every year. In 2017 the CCBC began tracking the number of LGBTQ children's books, the numbers are sobering. Of the 134 books produced with LGBTQ content only 21 were written BY someone in the LGBTQ community. And with so few books that reflect us as well as even fewer written BY us, it can be challenging to be critical of the few that are produced. However, due to the nature of the industry and the sociocultural climate of the US it is vital that we educate ourselves to help bring authentic and appropriate LGBTQI children's books into our homes, libraries and classrooms.

This supports our families and especially our kids, and gloriously it supports LGBTQI children in public settings who may or may not have supportive families. The books you vet and share support not just our community, but are a way to extend our love and experience OUT to the children that we once were and support their families into greater LGBTQI love and awareness.

These are a series of guidelines for assessing LGBTQI children's books through a social justice/ LGBTQI lens rooted in love and respect for our community. The basic frame and a series of questions are meant to help bring conscious and critical awareness to the books that feature LGBTQI characters and stories.

## Basic Frame:

- » Visual/Nonverbal Story
- » Cultural Awareness: LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Queer, Intersex), IPOC (Indigenous, People of Color), Disability communities
- » Suppressed History/Context
- » Lived experience, 'first voice' or 'own voice' contrasted with non-LGBTQI parent or professional voice (teacher, therapist, counselor)
- » Subtext and/or unconscious material/implicit bias

## Intent:

- » Less about ratings and judgment and more about care and awareness
  - *even though a book may not hit all the marks, being able to acknowledge that with kids can be a powerful tool to help develop their own critical awareness and open up conversations*

## Review Questions: (akin to researching 'fake news')

The questions (pgs. 3-4) are meant to draw our awareness and engage our thinking. They are not a checklist of rights and wrongs. They can support us in choosing books that resonate with us and our community, help guide our conversations with our kids, provide the chance to talk about how few books we have available and how and why some of them are limited in their perspectives.

I encourage parents to take the time to do a little research, critically look at the books our kids come into contact with and have the conversations... and when you find good books that lead to bigger conversations, get them into the classrooms and libraries and share your experience. Do not rely on blog and review recommendations. Many well intentioned bloggers/reviewers are also limited. We are at a time when we must develop our own awareness and be proactive in looking at what LGBTQI children's books are being created and what they're communicating to our kids, especially around gender and race. This is a time of waking up and taking action. Reflection is a powerful message of belonging that empowers our kids to find their way in the world.

## Resources:

- » Statistics about how many more books each community needs to create each year to stand in equity:
  - <http://www.reflectionpress.com/childrens-books-radicalact/>
- » Interview about Maya's 3 traditional picture books within a personal queer frame:
  - [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/04/call-me-tree\\_n\\_6994138.html#](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/04/call-me-tree_n_6994138.html#)
  - *Call Me Tree, I Know the River Loves Me, My Colors, My World*  
written and illustrated by Maya
- » School of the Free Mind Children's Book Course:
  - <http://www.schoolofthefreemind.com/courses/the-heart-of-it/>
- » Examples and support for bringing critical awareness to children's books:
  - <https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>
  - <http://readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com/>

## Books referenced in presentation (& some others):

- » Recommend for reflection:
  - Vivek Shraya, Rajni Perera: *The Boy in the Bindi*
  - Syrus Marcus Ware: *Love is in the Hair*
  - Beth Reichmuth, Nomy Lamm: *I'm Jay, Let's Play*
  - Catherine Hernandez, Marisa Firebaugh: *M is for Mustache*
  - S. Bear Bergman, Rachel Dougherty: *Is That for a Boy or a Girl?*
  - Gayle Pitman, Kristyna Litten: *This Day in June*
- » Recommend for parent perspective:
  - Laurin Mayeno, Robert Liu-Trujillo: *One of a Kind Like Me*
- » Recommend for Sex Ed:
  - Cory Silverberg, Fiona Smyth: *What Makes a Baby* and *Sex is a Funny Word*
- » Recommend for conversation and reflection:
  - Marcus Ewert, Rex Ray: *10,000 Dresses*
- » Do NOT recommend because of implicit bias and plagiarism:
  - Brook Pessin-Whedbee, Naomi Bardoff: *Who Are You? The Kid's Guide to Gender Identity*
  - Kelly Storck: *The Gender Identity Workbook for Kids*
  
- » **Maya's books through Reflection Press:**
  - *Gender Now Coloring Book*
  - *They, She, He, Me: Free to Be!*
  - *The Gender Wheel*
  - *When a Bully is President: Truth and Creativity for Oppressive Times*

# Review Questions

## Author

- » **Is this author/artist from the LGBTQI community?**
- » Are they Indigenous or a Person of Color?
- » What is their profession? Is it related to their authorship?
- » Are they a parent? educator? therapist or counselor? **What is their relationship to kids?**
- » Are they telling their story? If not where is this story coming from?
- » Are they claiming to be an expert? (especially relevant to LGBTQI nonfiction)

## Art

- » The majority of what we teach is nonverbal
- » Do LGBTQI characters feel recognizable to you? How so?
- » Do you see yourself or folks you know reflected? Who is not reflected?
- » Are there different kinds of LGBTQI people shown or mostly similar kinds of people?
- » Are IPOC and disabled people shown? Different body sizes? Notice skin tones.
- » Who are what is shown the most? The least?
- » Do you like the art? What does it remind you of? Does it feel thoughtful and creative? What don't you like about the art? Does anything feel missing?

## Gender

- » Are words like 'boy' or 'girl' used and how?
- » Are more than 2 genders shown?
- » How are different genders portrayed?
- » Note basic stereotypical representations: (just a quick few to get started)
  - *Girls: small, long hair, thin, 'pretty', decorated*
  - *Boys: larger, short hair, thin, 'cute' or 'handsome', plain*
- » What pronouns are used?
- » Are you reflected? People you know? Who is not reflected?
- » If you are someone not reflected, how does this sit with you? Can you imagine how you would feel if you were reflected? What if you were the main character?
- » What does this communicate to a child about the world around them?
  - *NOTE: To remedy the binary we must expand and play with pronouns constantly using any and all media available to us whether LGBTQI focused or not. Expanding the binary supports our community and helps dismantle layered systems that oppress us specifically.*

## Storyline/Text

- » Feelings
  - *What is the overall emotional tone of the story?*
  - *Who has the most feelings? And what are they?*
  - *Who doesn't have a lot of feelings?*
- » Common Narratives to be Aware of
  - *Incessant inclusion of bullying-what does this communicate? Notice how many books are published and how many include bullying? With so few books published this becomes a dominant narrative: You will be bullied.*
  - *LGBTQI characters must be exceptional in some way to be valued. This includes but is not limited to the savior or hero position.*

- *LGBTQI characters must be convinced they're 'special' in order to cope and/or be seen as valuable by others, instead of being seen as normal and the reality that others are limited in their perspectives of inclusion. This is a form of othering.*
- *Boy wearing a dress is a dominant narrative for awhile. What does this communicate? What LGBTQI characters are absent? How does this reflect or not reflect the dominant culture and the fact that it is a patriarchy?*

## » Text

- *The basics:*
  - What is the story about?
  - Are the characters fully realized and believable or stereotypical, one dimensional, predictable?
  - Did you learn anything?
  - Did you feel anything?
  - Were you entertained?
  - Was the author speaking to you as a part of our community? Or were they explaining our community to non-LGBTQI people?
  - What catches you attention? Both good and not so good.
  - What feels like it's missing?
- *Nonfiction:*
  - What do they define, share, tell?
  - What do they not define, share, tell?
  - Do they cite their resources or are their resources other resources?
  - Are they speaking from lived experience?
  - What is their position in the LGBTQI community?
  - Is their work plagiarized from LGBTQI authors? This is sadly so prevalent that we need to purposefully ask this question and be aware that many of the same resources are available in our own community. Support LGBTQI authors!

## Overall message

- » What is the most basic message/s of the book? This is usually the intended message of the author.

## Subtle message

- » What is the underlying or subtle message(s) of the book including both explicit and implicit content? Note what implicit bias may come from the author's position in our culture/society. (Rejoice and share if they deal with it in their text and/or imagery!)
  - *Explicit: story or text, art, stated intent*
  - *Implicit/subtle/sometimes unconscious: everything you've reviewed above taken into account within the context of our current culture/society, implicit or unconscious bias*
    - For example, prioritizing young, white males, even gay ones is more important than supporting other children in our current culture, especially when they're potentially socially at risk for not performing their appropriate gender assignment.
      - Other children matter less or do not matter.

## Race/ethnicity, disability, LGBTQI—the whole picture

- » Are there multiple race and ethnic reflections in characters, communities and environments? How diverse? How recognizable from your own community and family?
- » Are disabled people reflected? If so, how?
- » Are multiple reflections of LGBTQI people present? Latinx Butch dykes? Professional African American Gays? Multiracial Trans Therapists? Masculine White Gay athletes?
- » Two Spirit- this is a specific identity tied to indigenous cultures of the US