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Review: Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Teens: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians by Hillias J. Martin, Jr. and James R. Murdock

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Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Teens: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians by Hillias J. Martin, Jr. and James R. Murdock. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2007. 215 pp. ISBN 1-55570-566-9.

“Today, when queer teens come to the library or search its catalog online, what do they want to find? In a word: themselves,” write Hillias J. Martin, Jr. and James R. Murdock, authors of the newest title in Neal-Schuman’s series, *How-To-Do-It-Manual for Librarians* (Martin & Murdock 2007, p. 19). With surprising efficiency, Martin and Murdock compendiously tackle the often complicated role of the library in helping queer teens. They offer concise and innovative suggestions for handling challenging situations, such as the placement of books, patron privacy, negotiating parents’ questions, and more. The manual includes a well organized, annotated guide of more than 50 fiction, non-fiction and multimedia works and more than 30 programming ideas to provide a welcoming environment for all teens, many of which envision new ways to connect queer teens and the library. More attention could have been paid to the needs of double minorities (queer people of color)—especially as self-identification and representation is central to the authors’ endeavor—but the fact that they address these issues at all is a long overdue breakthrough. Martin and Murdock present a manual richly shaped by sympathy for the difficulties of queer adolescence that is clarified to extraordinary success.

There is no lack of evidence for the haunting difficulties queer teens face or for the desperate role of the library in serving queer teens. The authors cite numerous studies attesting to these difficulties. For example, the National Mental Health Association finds that “nearly 80 percent of high school students report that LGBTQ students are bullied in their school” (Martin & Murdock, 2007, p. 13). According to the Human Rights Watch report titled *Hatred in the Hallways*,

Gay youth spend an inordinate amount of energy plotting how to get safely to and from school, how to avoid the hallways when other students are present so they can avoid slurs and shoves, how to cut gym class to escape being beaten up—in short how to become invisible so they will not be verbally and physically attacked. Too often, students have little energy left to learn (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Additionally, Martin and Murdock find that as a result of prejudice and phobia, queer teens are four times more likely to attempt suicide and account for one-third of successful suicides (Frankowski, 2004; Safren and Heimberg 1999).

One can understand the sympathy, or perhaps the empathy, that motivates Martin and Murdock’s manual, partly born out of these statistics, which will not astonish anyone attuned to the way our society denies queer lives. The statistics

on triple and quadruple incidence of suicide among queer adolescents first appeared in a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 1989. Under congressional pressure, however, recommendations based on this section of the report were overtly censored. Federal funding for the study of sexual behavior and sexuality dried up throughout the 1990s (Sedgwick, 1994, pp. 2-3). As noted literary critic Eve Sedgwick claims, “Seemingly, this society wants its children to know nothing; wants its queer children to conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die; and wants not to know that it is getting what it wants” (p. 3).

For Martin and Murdock, being a queer survivor is a matter of surviving threats, stigma, the spiraling violence of gay- and lesbian-bashing, and (in the AIDS emergency) the omnipresence of somatic fear and wrenching loss. Indeed, they see a society that despoiled queer lives during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. “The phrase [SILENCE = DEATH] highlighted the fact that by failing to acknowledge the disease, the U.S. government allowed HIV/ AIDS to spread rampantly, effectively signing death warrants for hundred of thousands of people” (Martin & Murdock, 2007, p. 15).

Given the historical and current threat to queer lives, the authors reveal the ways in which librarians provide resources for queer survival. The manual inherently acknowledges that in adolescence the ability to attach and identify to cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects of various media, is essential to queer teen survival. “Reading books and magazines, watching films and television shows, and finding online communities can shatter the silence of homophobia” (Martin & Murdock, 2007, p. 16). In this sense, Martin and Murdock reiterate a responsibility that librarians have to all adolescents: simply, to provide them with the things they need—intelligible information, support and respect.

Martin and Murdock offer multiple ways of achieving this, including speaking directly to queer teens to evaluate what they want from a library, exploring the inner life of a queer teen (home life, school life, and “library life”), matching queer materials with all teen patrons, using databases specific to queer information, and finding support in the larger community. Throughout the manual, Martin and Murdock give concrete examples, specifically naming queer young adult fiction and non-fiction, periodicals, biographies and autobiographies, films, music, television, graphic novels, science fiction, queer databases, suggested search keys, and queer organizations. Additionally, Martin and Murdock give step-by-step instructions for forming a gay-straight alliance, hosting a queer TV night or coffee house, discussion groups, queer exhibits, creating queer zines, and much more. Furthermore, they anticipate the censorious complaints of some patrons, and provide suggestions and resources for defending challenged materials.

Despite the importance of needing to find oneself in the library, Martin and Murdock only briefly discuss the information needs of queer people of color or what the library can do to address these needs. In many ways, the need to identify with cultural objects as a matter of survival for queer teens of color is most pressing. Whereas queer teenagers in general are likelier to both attempt and accomplish suicide than others, minority adolescents are at even more extreme risk (Gibson, 1989). To their credit, the authors include a list of people of color in queer young adult fiction. While there are now a handful of books about queer teens of color, Martin and Murdock admit there is still room for improvement: “only one title, *True Believer*, features a gay black boy—and he’s just the secondary character, not the protagonist” (p. 86). They acknowledge that “this entire topic has not been given adequate attention” (p.11), but the authors don’t give it the attention it deserves either. Why put off for tomorrow that which can be done today?

That there is a dearth of literature in this area, especially in library and information science, is not a new observation. Literature in other fields can serve to inform our discipline and profession on the different ethnic and cultural attitudes toward queer people and the specific experiences of queer people of color. Identity is multifaceted; in order to serve the queer community, one should understand the issues concerning the diversity of people in it. “All library service starts with understanding the community the library represents” (Martin & Murdock, 2007, p. 4). Additionally, plenty of resources exist online that could prove vital for a queer teen of color. Take, for example, the Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society,¹ The Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Armenian Society,² as well as Yahoo youth groups for African Americans³ and Latina/os.⁴ Mention of these resources gives some visibility to what already exists, however limited. Otherwise, SILENCE = DEATH.

While Martin and Murdock do not fully consider the limitations of a term like “homosexuality,” and they limit the power of a term like “queer” only to inclusion and reclaiming a slur, these are minor quibbles for a book whose strength lies in providing clear instructions on serving queer teens in libraries. To have exhausted detailed debates about identity and sexuality theories would not serve their readers. Instead, Martin and Murdock provide succinct, easy to understand explanations of how queer teen issues make their way into librarianship. That in and of itself is a remarkable feat.

Notes

¹Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society. Retrieved May 28, 2007, from <http://www.glas.org/>

²Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Armenian Society. Retrieved May 28, 2007, from <http://www.galasia.org/>

³Gay African American ATL Youth. Retrieved May 28, 2007, from <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/gayafricanamericanatlyouth/>

⁴Espacio para los jovenes GLBT latinos. Retrieved May 28, 2007, from <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/latinolatinalgbtyouth/>

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Reviewer

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