50 Years of Queer Picture Books

Scholarly Perspectives on LGBTQ+ Children’s Literature

New York Public Library

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Introduction

The 1970s made way for the publication of the earliest queer picture books—and was the same decade that witnessed the emergence of one of the most consequential anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns. Over the last 50 years, the genre’s narrative and representational strategies have continued to be similarly influenced by social and cultural shifts and targeted for censorship for its content.

Queer Picture Books & Censorship Now
How much has changed since the early decades of censorship? On one hand, the sheer volume of new queer texts in recent years points to changing attitudes about LGBTQ+ visibility and acceptance in our society. On the other hand, the American Library Association’s (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom continues to find that queer picture books populate the “Most Challenged Books” lists.¹

In fact, according to ALA reporting, there has been a 19-fold increase in unique titles challenged in schools and libraries between 2020 and 2023, most of which were authored by or centered around stories featuring LGBTQ+, Black, Indigenous, or people of color. If LGBTQ+ picture books encourage readers to imagine and enact new ways to live in the world—as suggested by Jennifer Miller, PhD, a contributor to this guide—then how might censorship impact the classroom and beyond?²

Teaching Ourselves out of Self-Censorship
Even in the absence of any state- or district-level policy preventing educators from instructing with queer literature, many teachers will often choose to self-censor by regularly opting to omit inclusive texts that depict same-gender parents or feature characters that resist normative gender expressions—even when students broach the topics themselves. When questioned about this logic, teachers often cite fear of parental backlash, trepidation about introducing “inappropriate” content, unfamiliarity with queer literature, and lack of training in navigating gender and sexuality topics.³

The purpose of this guide is to equip educators to feel more empowered in incorporating queer picture books into their teaching. It outlines five thematic entry points—queer kinship, gay weddings, dress and play, gender identity, and grief and loss—in essays that provide context on key moments that shaped queer picture books as we know them today.

How to Use This Guide

Featuring materials from the research collections at The New York Public Library, this guide is designed to inform educators about key information on LGBTQ+ picture books and support their instruction in the classroom. In this guide, you’ll find:

- **Five contextual essays** written by scholars, historians, and experts, featuring a range of viewpoints and perspectives on the reading and teaching of LGBTQ+ children’s literature.

- **A historical list of queer picture books** designed to serve as a resource for those interested in tracing the historical arc of the genre.

- **Images from The New York Public Library Digital Collections**, our online platform that hosts our digitized collections, included to provide additional visual context. Search the accompanying Image ID and explore the collections: digitalcollections.nypl.org

Pair this guide with *Reading with Pride: Contemporary Queer Picture Books*—a book list that celebrates the humanity, personality, and diversity of LGBTQ+ experiences, histories, and stories—and our accompanying Educator Guide, which comes with ready-to-use discussion questions and classroom activities.

Discover the book list, additional teaching tools, and more from the Center for Educators and Schools: nypl.org/readingwithpride
Queer Kinship
Exploring the Family Unit Through LGBTQ+ Picture Books

Jennifer Miller, PhD
Author of The Transformative Potential of LGBTQ+ Children's Picture Books

Since the initial publication of picture books featuring LGBTQ+ characters in the late 70s, the concept of family has continued to be a popular theme explored in the genre. Most of these picture books were products of small, mission-oriented presses and creators who were personally connected to the LGBTQ+ community as members or allies.

Shifts in representations of lesbian and gay family members—specifically lesbian and gay parents, gay uncles, and, occasionally, lesbian or gay grandparents—heavily coincided with the legalization of marriage equality in 2015 as well as less subtle shifts in public opinion and cultural representations of LGBTQ+ people.

In fact, public discourse about LGBTQ+ people first began to shift in the late 1990s and after 2000 as public support for marriage equality, lesbian and gay adoption rights, and lesbian and gay non-discrimination policies continued to grow. Now, lesbian and gay characters can exist outside of being the “problem” in picture books, serving as loving family members in recent publications.

Lesbian & Gay Parents
Some of the queerest representations of families parented by lesbians and gay men were published in the emergent years of the genre. One of the earlier books published was Jane Severance’s When Megan Went Away (1979) by Lollipop Power Inc., a small cooperative feminist press. The book traces the breakup of a lesbian couple raising a child together in the late 70s. The press later published Severance’s second book, Lots of Mommies (1983), which tells the story of a little girl raised by several women. Both books present affirming images of lesbian-parented families—one featuring a single mom; the other, communal living.

Several years later, Lesléa Newman, a central figure in LGBTQ+ children’s literature, came out with the popular Heather Has Two Mommies (1989), which depicted a happily paired lesbian couple raising a child, serving as a template for many that follow.

In 1990, another small press, Alyson Wonderland, began publishing LGBTQ+ picture books. After acquiring and republishing Newman’s Heather Has Two Mommies, they published Michael Willhoite’s Daddy’s Roommate (1990), a story narrated by a young boy, following his mother’s and father’s divorce and his father’s subsequent cohabitation with a man. In the book, the young boy’s mother explains that his father is gay. Several other books about gay and lesbian parenting were published in the 1990s—many by Alyson Wonderland, including Forman Brown’s The Generous Jefferson Bartleby Jones (1991)—which represents gay-parented families as enviable models of care and joy.

Many of the perspectives before 2000 place the central focus on children’s difficulty believing that their peers have two moms or two dads. This popular storyline became less prevalent in the early 2000s and disappeared by 2015.
Gay Uncles
A handful of texts featuring gay uncles were published starting in 1989. Most of the uncles in early picture books die from AIDS-related illnesses, which problematically associated gay men with death and dying.

The trend began with MaryKate Jordan’s *Losing Uncle Tim* (1989), a publication by Albert Whitman that explores the relationship between a boy named Daniel and his beloved uncle. Eileen Pollack’s *Whisper Whisper Jesse, Whisper Whisper Josh: A Story About AIDS* (1992), Patricia Quinlan’s *Tiger Flowers* (1994), and Lesléa Newman’s *Too Far Away to Touch* (1995) all depict the death of a gay man from a child’s point of view. The timing of these books demonstrates a cultural lag between the emergence and awareness of HIV and AIDS and its representation in children’s books.

Representations of gay uncles changed radically after 2000. Instead of dying from AIDS-related complications, these gay uncles were often depicted in relationships, frequently getting married. For instance, Sarah S. Brannen’s *Uncle Bobby’s Wedding* (2008) is about a little girl, Chloe, who is worried that her favorite uncle will have less time for her once he marries his partner, Jaime. The shift from gay uncles as peripheral figures of the family unit changes as gay uncles are represented as having families of their own.

Lesbian & Gay Grandparents
Lesbian and gay grandparents are less frequently depicted in picture books—with several notable exceptions. Jeanne Arnold’s *Amy Asks a Question . . . Grandma—What Is a Lesbian?* (1996) was published by Mother Courage Press, a small press co-founded by the author and her partner. In it, a young girl learns about lesbian culture from her grandmother who provides a celebratory description of Pride parades, rainbow flags, and commitment ceremonies.

More recent representations include Harry Woodgate’s *Grandad’s Camper* (2021) and *Grandad’s Pride* (2023), both published by Little Bee Books, a small press that focuses on diverse and inclusive representations in picture books. Similar to Arnold’s picture book, Woodgate’s work explores queer culture through an intergenerational relationship between grandparent and grandchild.

**Queer Kids**
Many parents, particularly mothers, have created picture books that explore the experiences of their own LGBTQ+ children. One of the earliest representations, Cheryl Kilodavis’s *My Princess Boy* (2009), depicts a mother’s love for her gender-creative son. A few years later, parent-advocates Sarah and Ian Hoffman wrote *Jacob’s New Dress* (2014) about their dress-wearing son. These books affirm the presumably heterosexual parents’ ability to meet the emotional needs of their queer children.

A few books represent LGBTQ+ children’s need for support beyond the heterosexual family. For instance, Marcus Ewert’s *10,000 Dresses* (2008)—published by Triangle Square Press for Young Readers, the children’s book imprint of the politically progressive Seven Stories Press—tells the story of Bailey, a transgender girl who experiences rejection from unsupportive family members. In the story, Bailey eventually meets an older girl, Laurel, who accepts her for who she is and supports her desire to create beautiful dresses, which the two create together. Ewert represents the heterosexual family as hostile to the queer child and represents queer kinship through the supportive relationship between Laurel and Bailey.

*“Representations of gay uncles changed radically after 2000. Instead of dying from AIDS-related complications, these gay uncles were often depicted in relationships, frequently getting married.”*

The importance of queer role models and community is also subtly explored in Alice Reeves’ *Vincent the Vixen* (2018). It was published by a small press, Truth & Tails, founded by Reeves and Phoebe Kirk. In the text, a young fox can articulate a queer gender identity with the support of an older transgender badger.

Books featuring LGBTQ+ family members can help satiate the hunger in children to encounter books that both reflect their lived realities and depict life experiences that are different from their own—thus supporting the development of their own identities and sense of belonging, even in their youth.
The Gay Wedding
Uncovering Children’s Perspectives in Picture Books Across Time

Selena E. Van Horn, PhD
Associate Professor of Literacy Education, California State University, Fresno

In June 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled in a 5-4 decision in favor of marriage equality, though it was not codified into law at the time. Years later, in December 2022, President Joe Biden signed the Respect for Marriage Act, overturning the Defense of Marriage Act (1996) and requiring legal marriages to be recognized at both the state and federal level, regardless of the state where couples get married.

Over the last 50 years, children’s literature about same-sex weddings and marriages has grown—both in the quantity of books published and expanding storylines. Specifically in the last 10 years, books have widened in focus as these marriages have become legal in the United States and parts of the international community.

An example of this can be seen in Rob Sander’s Two Grooms on a Cake: The Story of America’s First Gay Wedding (2021), which tells the 1971 story of Jack Baker and Michael McConnell, the first same-sex couple in America to be legally married. The nonfiction story is paired with a fictional tale of groom wedding cake toppers, making it a great option to support teaching the history of marriage equality and what those rights mean in legal and personal ways.

“Children’s literature can aid in answering questions, teach us alongside young readers, and create space to follow children’s inquiries.”

Children’s Perspectives on Weddings & Marriage
A wedding is a joyous event to celebrate love, connection, and growing families. Many children in our classrooms will have the opportunity to attend and even participate in weddings throughout their lives. As children learn more about the events, they may have questions about who participates, what will happen, and what their role is in the festivities. Children’s literature can aid in answering questions, teach us alongside young readers, and create space to follow children’s inquiries.

Meryl G. Gordon and Holly Clifton-Brown’s The Flower Girl Wore Celery (2016) and Sarah S. Brannen and Lucia Soto’s Uncle Bobby’s Wedding (2020) are each told from a child’s perspective of participating in a family member’s wedding. In The Flower Girl Wore Celery, Emma is invited to be a flower girl in her cousin’s wedding. The story’s focus is on Emma’s role and discoveries about weddings—including that there will be two brides at this one. Thus, this text fulfilled a wish-list item for many—delivering a book where an LGBTQ+ couple is represented not as the sole narrative component.

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Perspectives on LGBTQ+ Children’s Literature
These two books focus on people and their stories—not on animals or mythical beings. Reading stories about the latter might elicit a conversation about why the author selected these characters over humans. In the past, titles featuring animal characters might have created space for the representation of multiple identities, thus filling a broad need during a time when there was a lack of titles celebrating LGBTQ+ identities at large.

Since then, scholars have critiqued titles using animals as stand-ins for people, as they hold the potential to erase the identities of LGBTQ+ people and communities. The 2008 edition of Brannen’s *Uncle Bobby’s Wedding* featured guinea pigs as the main characters. It was reissued in 2022, celebrating the marriage of an interracial couple through illustrations by Lucia Soto.

When introducing queer picture books in their classroom, educators can critically examine and discuss the intersecting identities of characters, as many books continue to spotlight marriages between white characters, particularly men. Among the titles featured here, *Uncle Bobby’s Wedding* centers an interracial gay couple, and *The Flower Girl Wore Celery* presents a Jewish lesbian couple. Diversity in representation encourages readers to engage with a variety of literacies that showcase characters who look like them and their community members. By exposing children to a diverse cast of characters, we encourage them to develop empathy and a healthier sense of self during their foundational years, which is critical for their development.

Dress & Play

Fashion, Style & Embodiment in Children’s Picture Books

Kareem Khubchandani, PhD
Associate Professor of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, Tufts University

We put on clothes and style ourselves every day. Aprons and steel-toed boots give us protection at work. Ties and brogues ready us for office-place formality. Uniforms and name tags signal our social role, and people interact with us accordingly. Lycra helps us run and swim, goose down keeps us warm, and Gore-Tex keeps us dry.

But clothing goes beyond its practical use. A sparkling brooch, dandy pocket square, or un-scuffed brand-spanking-new high tops might make us feel like we’re stepping into the world cool, fabulous, or special. With a pair of cat ears or a rhinestoned gown, we become glorious beings, animals, aliens, divas! Sometimes, we even time travel.

Clothing and style are simultaneously matters of the everyday and tools of fantasy; they allow us to transcend the restrictions that society places on us. It’s no wonder that clothing becomes so central to queer picture books; some insist on the very normal and ordinary act of dressing, and others show how dress creates opportunities to transcend not only gender binaries, but leave the ordinary and inegalitarian world behind altogether.

Ian and Sarah Hoffman’s Jacob’s New Dress (2014), Robb Pearlman and Eda Kaban’s Pink Is for Boys (2018), Kimberly Brubaker Bradley and R. W. Alley’s Ballerino Nate (2006), Harvey Fierstein’s The Sissy Duckling (2002), Chris Censullo’s The Boy with the Big Blue Hair (2013)—so many picture books depict the gender-bending child. In almost every case, the child is questioned for their gender nonconforming sartorial choice; often, they are bullied for innocently crossing normative gender boundaries. By the end of the books, these children’s performances of difference become a nonissue. Sometimes, they end up being an asset to the other children. Queerness becomes normal, safe, or even marketable!

Some picture books suggest that people are just “unique,” and it will be a struggle to show others why your individuality matters. You, too, could be A Peacock Amongst Pigeons (2015)! That said, many more books labor to teach children how to survive society’s deep-seated anxiety around gender conformity and social dress.

“Clothing and style are simultaneously matters of the everyday and tools of fantasy; they allow us to transcend the restrictions that society places on us.”

Tracing Historical Anxieties about Gender

Approaching this societal anxiety from a historical standpoint, we can learn how dress stands in not only for gender, but race, morality, and sexuality, and make sense of this obsessive policing. In the mid-19th century, laws emerged across a majority of the U.S. that criminalized wearing clothes assigned to another gender. These nebulous policies didn’t exactly define which clothes belonged to what body, but allowed police to harass and arrest people whose behavior they didn’t like or trust.

For example, in 1888, a formerly enslaved person named William Dorsey Swann was arrested for female impersonation at a party in Washington D.C. that he was hosting for others who also liked to wear fancy gowns and socialize. His parties were interpreted as sexual events, conflating gender nonconformity with hypersexuality and sex work, and he was charged with running a brothel.
These laws were a symptom of the anxieties around gender categories that appeared amidst a changing world order: the emancipation of Black people, shifting gender roles under industrialization, migration of unmarried folks into large cities, new forms of leisure that were marked as vice and thus criminalized, and women’s suffrage movements. In addition, systems of knowledge were shifting, and scientific studies of gender and desire—such as ethnology, eugenics, and sexology—were drawing on the specious tools of racial science to try and categorize emergent identities in the early 20th century. These projects didn’t just name people as different but suggested some were more or less inferior to others—or more or less developed than others.

Clothing wasn’t spared this moralizing discourse. Amidst the colonization of Middle Eastern and Asian countries, harem pants—loose legged pants that taper around the ankle—became all the rage for women in the West. The backlash against this trend wasn’t just against the women wearing pants (a garment deemed too masculine at the time), but the pants themselves, which were seen as suggestive of the mysterious and hypersexual “Orient”—too scandalous and sensational for aristocratic white women. Fashion has constantly responded to global politics and economy, and what we think of as masculine and feminine dress constantly shifts through debates in the public sphere. Think about all the discussions about what presidential candidates and their spouses are allowed to wear!

The Importance of Clothing in Queer Picture Books

At various moments, dress has become so charged with gendered meaning that it comes as no surprise that parents and peers so fiercely police what children wear. This is also why picture books with images of boys stepping into high heels and frilly dresses and girls keeping their hair short or wearing tuxedos feel so visceral and urgent. These images soften the world a little and make room for children to simply be.

They offer important lessons to children and adults alike. Stacy B. Davids and Rachael Balsaitis’s Annie’s Plaid Shirt (2015) suggests that Annie’s attachment to her masculine shirt doesn’t have to be about gender per say; she simply relies on the comfort and safety that the garment provides. The shirt may or may not be about gender, but it is about the child’s well-being.

Titles that teach the reader what clothes do beyond sorting us into social categories have been the books that inspire me most. Morris Micklewhite’s tangerine dress (from Christine Baldacchino and Isabelle Malenfant’s Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress (2014)) allows him to lead his friends into outer space, and a little brown boy’s bindi helps him to find calm and connection with a larger universe in Vivek Shraya and Rajni Perera’s The Boy and the Bindi (2016). Perhaps most successful in staging the power of dress is Jessica Love’s Julián Is a Mermaid (2018), in which a young Latinx kid transports himself into a lusciously drawn underwater ecosystem by wrapping a white sheet around his waist and becoming a mermaid. A small, improvised fashion statement makes fabulous new worlds possible.

Queer theorists have taught us that “fabulous” (etymologically connected to “fable”) recalls acts of storytelling, mythmaking, and fairy tales. Fabulation—making myths and telling stories that can imagine and accommodate our strange selves—is so urgent for queer people who are often not named as part of the past nor written into the future.

At the end of Lesléa Newman and Peter Ferguson’s The Boy Who Cried Fabulous (2004), the boy’s parents finally learn to share his joy in calling more things “fabulous” as he struts around town. When kids routinely see the world as fabulous—by putting on a tangerine dress, plaid shirt, bindi, white sheet, or simply calling out, “that’s fabulous”—they engage in acts of invention that conjure a queerer tomorrow in the present.
Gender Identity
Tracing the Literary Arc of Trans Representation in Picture Books

Hal Schrieve
Children’s Librarian, The New York Public Library

The first picture book featuring trans characters was published in 1978, and, as far as we know, similar stories were not published again until the early 2000s, even as gay and lesbian parents continued to appear in literature for kids. During these three decades, trans support groups often encouraged a goal of being “stealth,” or closeted with cis peers, for the purposes of safety. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) defined “gender identity disorder” as a mental illness in 1980 (which would be removed as a mental illness in the DSM-5 in 2013). These social landscapes likely impacted publishing attitudes.

At the same time, the 80s and 90s saw underground and aboveground trans networking in newsletters, zines, and DIY spaces as trans people participated in gay liberation and developed a distinct political consciousness. Small subgroups of trans people coalesced into more of an identity-based movement. In 2000, the first summer camp for trans and gender nonconforming kids—Camp Ten Trees—began offering a social space for young trans people to meet each other.

Perhaps half a dozen titles about trans kids were published between 2000 and 2014. Whether because of blogging culture producing new discourse, increased access to pediatric trans care via Obama-era reforms, or American actress and activist Laverne Cox gracing TIME magazine’s cover, 2014 marked a turning point that included an uptick in the number of trans picture books. Since 2015, trans-run imprints like Flamingo Rampant have been founded to publish more trans-written and trans-illustrated work.

Genderqueer-ness, In-betweenness & Acceptance
Books about being outside of gender norms in dress, play, or expression are the most generally applicable to all trans children, who are unlikely to have the language to express more specific identities and aren’t yet old enough to pursue transition beyond a name change.

The first known picture book about a child living outside the gender binary was also the first trans book: the humorous and verbose X: A Fabulous Child’s Story (1978) by Lois Gould. After initial bullying and a parents’ campaign to reveal their “true sex” or else ban X from school, experts rule X shockingly well-adjusted, and other children begin to play creative and adventurous games with dolls, play sports not associated with their assigned gender, and express themselves more fully.

There would be a significant gap in time before more genderqueer picture books appeared on the market. 2013 brought genderqueer author Talcott Broadhead’s Meet Polkadot (2013)—a text-heavy book with energetic watercolor portraits of the author’s child telling readers that it’s okay for a child not to identify with gendered labels, paired with definitions for grown-ups spanning the margins. A bilingual book, Call Me Tree / Llámame árbol (2014) by Maya Christina Gonzalez, depicts a pronoun-free child who is more than the limiting possibilities of assigned gender.

From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea (2017) by trans author Kai Cheng Thom and illustrated by Wai-Yant Lee and Kai Yun Chin is a compelling trans picture book not specific to a particular identity. The book features a narrative short enough for read-alouds and an enthusiasm for beauty without conformity, parental care, and a clear liberation ideology that grants children autonomy to determine their own fate and power.

Maya Christina Gonzalez’s They, She, He, Me: Free to Be! (2017) is perhaps the earliest “intro to pronouns” book for children. It would be followed by books like Afsaneh Moradian’s Jamie Is Jamie: A Book About Being Yourself and Playing Your Way (2018) and Airlie Anderson’s Neither! (2018), which are about genderqueer and nonbinary children, and Angel Adeyoha’s 47,000 Beads (2017), which follows a two-spirit child learning about the history of their specific alternate gender in their nation.
Exploring Children’s Transitions in Picture Books

How might we express what transition means for a young audience? Marcus Ewert’s 10,000 Dresses (2008) features a trans girl named Bailey who dreams of thousands of dresses. Though her family demands she behave “like a boy,” Ewert’s text validates Bailey’s identity and desires without caveats—a first.

While genderqueer-ness and ambiguity can be liberating concepts for some children, foregrounding ambiguity has the dangerous potential to unintentionally direct trans children away from a clear sense of a gender identity. Who gets to decide whether a child is transgender or transsexual, rather than “just” gender nonconforming, is a particularly fraught historical question. It is only very recently that gender dysphoria has been medically validated as a reason to live as another gender, a moment that has produced enormous political pushback.

Jennifer Carr and Ben Rumback’s Be Who You Are (2010) is one early example of a book about a child actually transitioning—as is Goblinheart (2012) by trans author Brett Axel, which emphasizes self-determination. Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings’s I Am Jazz (2014) asserts that being trans is natural, innate, and unchangeable, though the book grants authority to a benevolent doctor that validates Jazz’s status. Its clean and tidy illustrations speak aspirationally to a period in the future when everyone will see trans children as ordinary. Erica Silverman and Holly Hatam’s Jack (Not Jackie) (2018) preaches simple acceptance to a trans boy’s sibling.

Since then, Kyle Lukoff’s Call Me Max (2019) and When Aidan Became a Brother (2019), Deshanna and Trinity Neal’s My Rainbow (2020), and JR and Vanessa Ford’s Calvin (2021) speak to and about children who undertake material steps like using a new name, bathroom, or clothes as they present a new identity. Jodie Patterson’s Born Ready: The True Story of a Boy Named Penelope (2021) and Gavin Grimm and Kyle Lukoff’s If You’re a Kid Like Gavin: The True Story of a Young Trans Activist (2022) provide real-world accounts of what it might mean to change your presented gender—including experiencing pushback from society and within schools.

The Importance of Self-Determination

It is important to respect the self-determination of any person around their own gender and worth thinking critically about books that describe people in terms that counter how they describe themselves. For example, Verla Kay and Adam Gustavson’s Rough, Tough Charley (2007) is a picture book about Charley Parkhurst, a stagecoach driver who lived his life as a man. In the text, Parkhurst is gendered as a woman when his death reveals his sex, likely because gender essentialism was normative at the time of this publication.

“It is only very recently that gender dysphoria has been medically validated as a reason to live as another gender, a moment that has produced enormous political pushback.”

Some books authored by cis people, despite being well intentioned, depict trans characters as animals or objects, stripping autonomy away from the characters. In Jessica Walton and Dougal MacPherson’s Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story About Gender and Friendship (2016), Tilly is a transfeminine teddy bear that belongs to a white cis boy, who is the one charged with introducing and validating her identity. Though the story captures the despair that one might feel when their true self and competencies aren’t recognized, the narrative places trans acceptance under the control of cis people. What would Tilly do if the narrator doesn’t affirm her identity?

Educators can incorporate trans picture books in their classrooms to reflect what trans children are already experiencing and to encourage gender-conforming children to practice empathy and solidarity. Compared to early years of queer children’s literature, there is now an array of stories that students can read that support these goals.
Grief & Loss
Picturing Death & Overlooking Sexuality in Early AIDS-Related Picture Books

Theodore (ted) Kerr
Founding Member of What Would an HIV Doula Do?

Mourning the Gay Uncle
Early picture books covering AIDS were rooted in grief and loss and were groundbreaking due to the frankness with which AIDS and death were addressed. Less evolved were the ways sexuality was handled and the homogeneity of the stories.

Three of these early picture books—Patricia Quinlan and Janet Wilson’s *Tiger Flowers* (1994), Eileen Pollack and Bruce Giffoy’s *Whisper Whisper Jesse, Whisper Whisper Josh: A Story About AIDS* (1992), and MaryKate Jordan and Judith Friedman’s *Losing Uncle Tim* (1989)—have overlapping components: all explore the perspective of a white boy from a heterosexual, presumed middle-class family, learning to deal with death as they begin to say goodbye to their dying uncle. In each book, the cause of death is clearly stated: AIDS. The importance of this candor cannot be understated.

Around the publication of the three books, newspapers were still using euphemisms in obituaries for people who died of AIDS, including “complications from pneumonia.” Picture books did what the mainstream press would not: they told the truth about an emerging and complex epidemic while helping readers deal with its realities.

Less clear in the books are how readers are to understand the sexuality of the uncles. In each book, the uncles’ status as a gay man is implicitly stated. For example, *Tiger Flowers* mentions a close male friend of the uncle, though their relationship is never specified. In *Whisper Whisper Jesse, Whisper Whisper Josh*, Jesse is told by a cousin that Uncle Josh got AIDS because “he was a bad man.” Without evidence suggesting otherwise, what else is a reader then and now to infer besides homosexuality?

These early picture books are part of what queer literature scholar Jennifer Miller, PhD, refers to as the “gay uncle” trope, which “depicts gay men as a nonthreatening accessory to the heterosexual family unit.”⁴ The representations of the men’s sexuality, Miller argues, are cloaked “in secrecy and quasi shame.”⁵ For the most part, these stories were primarily about white uncles in white families.

In a 1998 essay, queer theorist Robert McRuer, PhD, calls out the trope, observing that in “children’s literature about AIDS . . . the paradox plays itself out: the story of AIDS may demand the text of the gay male body, but that body is an ‘anti-body.’”⁶ The ramifications of not specifying the uncle’s sexuality has many impacts, McRuer argues, including the erasure of “life-saving lessons learned in gay and lesbian communities” from within the AIDS epidemic.⁷ McRuer is not wrong. And yet, how one would evaluate these books might depend on one’s understanding of children’s literature made in response to timely and complex issues.

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Visions of a Transformed World

Miller argues that LGBTQ+ literature with progressive social agendas is not written with the expectation to make money and that “without the pressure to turn a profit and guided by a mission to challenge unjust social relations . . . LGBTQ+ children’s picture books of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s often offered visions of a transformed world.”

I see two visions of transformation attempting to be shared within the aforementioned picture books, specifically around how the dying uncles move into the home of their adult siblings in each book.

First, the writers bring death into the domestic world of the child. The young people spend more time with their uncles and witness the process of death, including reduced capacity for life, pain-induced mood swings, and, eventually, absence. Echoing the candor around how AIDS is named as the cause of death, death itself is not relegated to euphemism. Phrases like “he is no longer with us” are not left to be parsed for meaning, but serve as accurate descriptions of a new material reality. At the end of *Losing Uncle Tim*, Daniel sees his deceased uncle’s likeness in a window reflection as he contemplates life. Though Uncle Tim is gone, his impact remains.

Second, these three authors seem to be attempting to offer a vision of a transformed world as it relates to homophobia. As someone who has been doing AIDS cultural production work for over 20 years, I am familiar with another common trope related to AIDS beyond the gay uncle: the one about the gay person escaping a homophobic family by moving to New York, only to have to return “home” and die after an HIV diagnosis, cut off from the life they made in the city. With this in mind, a generous reader can see these picture books offering a counternarrative: one in which the uncles don’t return to a house of hate but rather are welcomed into a familial home of love.

Additionally, accusations of pedophilia are a constant site of homophobia in the lives of queer people. Beyond the stigma-fighting reminders that HIV is not transmitted through casual contact, these books carry the message that the uncles are not a danger to anyone in the home, including their nephews.

Yet, McRuer’s points still stand: in lieu of represented personhood, aspects of gay men’s lives are instrumentalized for the benefit of the heterosexual family. While the uncles are cared for in the books, the reader is not given any indication of what being in a sibling’s domestic space, as they die, has on them.

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“The story that gets told in the immediacy of a crisis has not yet been saved from unexamined societal bias.”

Pandemic Picture Books
What should we make of books that nimbly address death, grief, and loss, yet remain unhelpful in terms of sexuality and diversity? To Gabriel Duckels, PhD, this division comes as no surprise. In an 2024 article about COVID and HIV youth literature, Duckels writes about how when stories emerge as an epidemic is still unfolding, “the representation of health crises is structured by omission and inaccuracy—which is to say, these texts are not only bound up in larger profound social and political discourses but actively produce and sustain them.” The story that gets told in the immediacy of a crisis has not yet been saved from unexamined societal bias. Those stories, as we see with LGBTQ+ literature that cover AIDS, will emerge later.

In the present day, other stories are being told, while the trope of gay uncles with HIV remains prevalent in many aspects of culture, due in part to the impact of life-saving medication that allows people with HIV to live longer than ever before. For example, Rob Sanders and Jamey Christoph’s *Stitch by Stitch: Cleve Jones and the AIDS Memorial Quilt* (2021) deftly shares the story of community mobilization and mourning with detail and compassion. It even offers a helpful discussion guide and glossary that covers words related to HIV, sexuality, and memorialization.

AIDS is not over, and neither is the robust and meaningful way that authors and illustrators are using picture books to share stories that enable discussion around grief, loss, and much more.

Explore a chronological list of LGBTQ+ children’s books—intended to be a reference for educators and scholars looking to get a more comprehensive history of queer picture books. This list draws from Appendix C in Jennifer Miller’s *The Transformative Potential of LGBTQ+ Children’s Picture Books*—includued with permission of University Press of Mississippi—plus a selection of relevant books curated by the Library’s Center for Educators and Schools.¹⁰

The books below are sorted chronologically by year and alphabetically by title. Titles with two dates indicate the year when it was first published and when it was republished.

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### 1970s

- **William’s Doll** by Charlotte Zolotow, illustrated by William Pène du Bois (1972)
- **Exactly Like Me** by Lynn Phillips (1972)
- **Nice Little Girls** by Elizabeth Levy, illustrated by Mordicai Gerstein (1974)
- **X: A Fabulous Child’s Story** by Lois Gould, illustrated by Jacqueline Chwast (1978)
- **When Megan Went Away** by Jane Severance, illustrated by Tea Schook (1979)
- **Oliver Button Is a Sissy** by Tomie dePaola (1979)
- **Jesse’s Dream Skirt** by Bruce Mack, illustrated by Marian Buchanan (1979)

### 1980s

- **Lots of Mommies** by Jane Severance, illustrated by Jan Jones (1983)
- **Tough Eddie** by Elizabeth Winthrop, illustrated by Lillian Hoban (1985)
- **Jenny Lived with Eric and Martine** by Susanne Bösche, illustrated by Andreas Hansen (1987)
- **The Boy Toy** by Phyllis Hacken Johnson, illustrated by Lena Shiffman (1988)
- **Losing Uncle Tim** by MaryKate Jordan, illustrated by Judith Friedman (1989)
- **Heather Has Two Mommies** by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Diane Souza (1989, 1990)

1990s

1990
Ash a's Mums by Rosamund Elwin and Michele Paulse, illustrated by Dawn Lee
Daddy's Roommate by Michael Willhoite

1991
Belinda's Bouquet by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Michael Willhoite
Bonjour, Mr. Satie by Tomie dePaola
The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans by Johnny Valentine, illustrated by Lynette Schmidt
The Generous Jefferson Bartleby Jones by Forman Brown, illustrated by Leslie Trawin
Gloria Goes to Pride by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Russell Crocker

1992
A Boy's Best Friend by Joan Alden, illustrated by Catherine Hopkins
The Daddy Machine by Johnny Valentine, illustrated by Lynette Schmidt
The Day They Put a Tax on Rainbows and Other Stories by Johnny Valentine, illustrated by Lynette Schmidt
Whisper Whisper Jesse, Whisper Whisper Josh: A Story About AIDS by Eileen Pollack, illustrated by Bruce Gilroy

1993
Caleb's Friend by Eric Jon Nones
Saturday Is Patty Day by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Annette Hegel
Uncle What-Is-It Is Coming to Visit!! by Michael Willhoite
Is Your Family Like Mine? by Lois Abramchik, illustrated by Alaiyo Bradshaw
Mr. Pam Pam and the Hullabazoo by Trish Cooke, illustrated by Patricia Aggs

1994
Anna Day and the O-Ring by Elaine Wickers
One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads by Johnny Valentine, illustrated by Melody Sarecky

1995
My Two Uncles by Judith Vigna
Too Far Away to Touch by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Catherine Stock
Who's in a Family? by Robert Skutch, illustrated by Laura Nienhaus

1996
Amy Asks a Question . . . Grandma—What Is a Lesbian? by Jeanne Arnold, illustrated by Barbara Lindquist
Daddy's Wedding by Michael Willhoite
Growing up with Same-Sex Parents: Zack's Story by Keith Elliot Greenberg, illustrated by Carol Halebian
My Dad Has HIV by Earl Alexander, Sheila Rudin, and Pam Sejkora, illustrated by Ronnie Walter Shipman

1998
Best Best Colors/Los mejores colores by Eric Hoffman, illustrated by Celeste Henriquez
Lucy Goes to the Country by Joseph Kennedy, illustrated by John Canemaker
A Name on the Quilt: A Story of Remembrance by Jeannine Atkins, illustrated by Tad Hills
2000s

2000
ABC: A Family Alphabet Book by Bobbie Combs, illustrated by Brian & Desiree Rappa
Are You a Boy or a Girl? by Karleen Pendleton Jiménez

2001
A Cowboy Named Ernestine by Nicole Rubel, edited by Jacqueline K. Ogburn
The Harvey Milk Story by Kari Krakow, illustrated by David Gardner
Max: The Stubborn Little Wolf by Marie-Odile Judes, illustrated by Martine Bourre
Princess Max by Laurie Stiller, illustrated by Gregory Rogers
Pugdog by Andrea U'Ren

2002
Bedtime for Baby Teddy by Tamara Arc-Dekker, illustrated by Jenni Boettcher
Felicia’s Favorite Story by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Adriana Romo
The Mommy Book by Todd Parr
The Sissy Duckling by Harvey Fierstein, illustrated by Henry Cole
The White Swan Express: A Story About Adoption by Jean Davies Okimoto and Elaine M. Aoki, illustrated by Mello So

2003
How My Family Came to Be: Daddy, Papa and Me by Andrew R. Aldrich, illustrated by Mike Motz
All Families Are Special by Norma Simon, illustrated by Teresa Flavin
The Boy Who Cried Fabulous by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Peter Ferguson
Carly: She’s Still My Daddy by Mary Boenke, illustrated by Dolores Dudley
Everywhere Babies by Susan Meyer, illustrated by Marla Frazee
A Fire Engine for Ruthie by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Cyd Moore
Flying Free by Jennifer C. Gregg, illustrated by Janna Richards
King and King and Family by Linda de Haan, illustrated by Stern Nijland
Molly’s Family by Nancy Garden, illustrated by Sharon Wooding
Mum and Mom Are Getting Married by Ken Setterington, illustrated by Alice Priestley
Pearl’s Christmas Present by Thomas Scott Wurst
The Princess Knight by Cornelia Funke, illustrated by Kerstin Meyer
What Are Parents?: The Daddy Edition by Kyme and Susan Fox-Lee, illustrated by Randy Jennings
While You Were Sleeping by Stephanie Burks, illustrated by Kelli Bienvenu

2005
And Tango Makes Three by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, illustrated by Henry Cole
Antonio’s Card by Rigoberto González, illustrated by Cecilia Concepción Álvarez
Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story by Kaitlyn Considine, illustrated by Binny Hobbs
Uncle Aiden by Laurel Dykstra

2006
Ballerino Nate by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley, illustrated by R. W. Alley
Buster’s Sugartime by Marc Brown
The Different Dragon by Jennifer Bryan, illustrated by Danamarie Hosler
Monicka’s Papa Is Tall by Heather Jopling, illustrated by Allyson Demoe
The Not-So-Only Child by Heather Jopling, illustrated by Lauren Page Russell
Ryan’s Mom Is Tall by Heather Jopling, illustrated by Allyson Demoe
Time to Get Up, Time to Go by David Milgrim
2007
*Mini Mia and Her Darling Uncle* by Pija Lindenbaum
*My Two Aunts* by Deb Bixler
*The Prince and Him: A Rainbow Bedtime Story* by Kendal Nite, illustrated by Y. Brassel
*Rough, Tough Charley* by Verla Kay, illustrated by Adam Gustavson
*We Belong Together: A Book About Adoption and Families* by Todd Parr

2008
*10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert, illustrated by Rex Ray
*Dear Child* by John Farrell, illustrated by Maurie J. Manning
*My Mommy Is a Boy* by Jason Martinez, illustrated by Karen Winchester
*The Turklebees of Turkledorf* by Jennifer Ingerman Miller

2009
*And Baby Makes Four* by Judith Benjamin, illustrated by Judith Freeman
*Arwen and Her Daddies* by Jarko de Witte van Leeuwen
*The Baby Kangaroo Treasure Hunt: A Gay Parenting Story* by Carmen Martinez Jover, illustrated by Rosemary Martinez
*Daddy, Papa, and Me* by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Carol Thompson
*In Our Mothers’ House* by Patricia Polacco
*Mommy, Mama, and Me* by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Carol Thompson
*Two Daddies . . . and Me!* by Robbi Anne Packard, illustrated by Lori Ann McElroy

2010s

2010
*Be Who You Are!* by Jennifer Carr, illustrated by Ben Rumbak
*Chimpy Discovers His Family* by James LaCroce
*City Time* by Jeannelle Ferreira, illustrated by J. Cecelia Haytko
*The Family Book* by Todd Parr
*My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis, illustrated by Suzanne DeSimone
*A Tale of Two Daddies* by Vanita Oelschlagler, illustrated by Kristin Blackwood and Mike Blanc
*A Tale of Two Mommies* by Vanita Oelschlagler, illustrated by Kristin Blackwood and Mike Blanc

2011
*All I Want to Be Is Me* by Phyllis Rothblatt
*The Boy with Pink Hair* by Perez Hilton, illustrated by Jen Hill
*Donovan’s Big Day* by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Mike Dutton
*Keesha and Her Two Moms Go Swimming* by Cheril N. Clarke and Monica Bey-Clarke, illustrated by Aiswarya Mukherjee
*The Lopez Family: Science Fair Day* by Monica Bey-Clarke and Cheril N. Clarke, illustrated by Aiswarya Mukherjee
*My Uncle’s Wedding* by Eric Ross, illustrated by Tray K. Greene

2011
*Odd Bird Out* by Helga Bansch

2011
*Operation Marriage* by Cynthia Chin-Lee, illustrated by Lea Lyon
*When Kathy Is Keith* by Wallace Wong
2012
The Adventures of Tulip, Birthday Wish Fairy by S. Bear Bergman, illustrated by Suzy Malik
Backwards Day by S. Bear Bergman, illustrated by KD Diamond
Goblinheart: A Fairy Tale by Brett Axel, illustrated by Terra Bidlespacher
Hello, It’s Only Me! The Diary of a Transgendered Child by Layde Aphrodite, illustrated by Jordan A Brewer, Janae A Brewer-Robinson and Idasia Beanca Brewer
Hugs of Three: My Daddies and Me by Stacey Bromberg and Joe Taravella, illustrated by Jessica Warrick
Who's in My Family?: All About Our Families by Robie H. Harris, illustrated by Nadine Bernard Westcott
When Leonard Lost His Spots: A Trans Parent Tail by Monique Costa, illustrated by Marina Shupik

2013
Adopting Ahava by Jennifer Byrne, illustrated by Oana Vaida
A Girl Like Any Other by Sophie Labelle
Meet Polkadot by Talcott Broadhead
My Mommy Is a Boy by Jason Martinez, illustrated by Karen Winchester
The Purim Hero by Elisabeth Kushner, illustrated by Mike Byrne
Ronald Humphrey Is Wearing a What? by Eileen Kiernan-Johnson, illustrated by Katrina Revenaugh

2014
When Kayla Was Kyle by Amy Fabrikant, illustrated by Jennifer Levine
What Makes a Baby by Cory Silverberg, illustrated by Fiona Smyth

2015
Annie’s Plaid Shirt by Stacy D. Davids, illustrated by Rachael Balsaitis
Are You a Boy or a Girl? by Sarah Savage, illustrated by Fox Fisher
But, I’m Not a Boy! by Katie Leone, illustrated by Alison Pfiefer
Is That for a Boy or Girl? by S. Bear Bergman, illustrated by Rachel Dougherty
Large Fears by Myles E. Johnson, illustrated by Kendrick Daye
Love Is in the Hair by Syrus Marcus Ware
M Is for Mustache: A Pride ABC Book by Catherine Hernandez, illustrated by Marisa Firebaugh
The Newspaper Pirates by j wallace skelton, illustrated by Ketch Wehr

Made by Raffi by Craig Pomranz, illustrated by Margaret Chamberlain
Michael and Me by Margaret Baker-Street
Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress by Christine Baldacchino, illustrated by Isabelle Malenfant
This Day in June by Gayle E. Pitman, illustrated by Kristyna Litten
Zak’s Safari: A Story about Donor-Conceived Kids with Two-Mom Families by Christy Tyner, illustrated by Ciaee

A Peacock Among Pigeons by Tyler Curry, illustrated by Clarione Gutierrez
The Princess of Great Daring by Tobi Hill-Meyer, illustrated by Elenore Toczynski
Rumplepimple by Suzanne DeWitt Hall, illustrated by Kevin Scott Gierman
Square Zair Pair by Jase Peeples, illustrated by Christine Knopp
Stella Brings the Family by Miriam B. Schiffer, illustrated by Holly Clifton-Brown
The Zero Dads Club by Angel Adeyoha, illustrated by Aubrey Williams
2016

The Boy and the Bindi by Vivek Shraya, illustrated by Rajni Perera
The Flower Girl Wore Celery by Meryl G. Gordon, illustrated by Holly Clifton-Brown
Home at Last by Vera B. Williams, illustrated by Chris Raschka
A Family Is a Family Is a Family by Sara O’Leary, illustrated by Qin Leng
Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story about Gender and Friendship by Jessica Walton, illustrated by Dougal MacPherson
Keesha’s South African Adventure by Cheril N. Clarke and Monica Bey-Clarke, illustrated by Julia Selyutina
Old Dog Baby Baby by Julie Fogliano, illustrated by Chris Raschka
One of a Kind Like Me/Único como yo by Laurin Mayeno, illustrated by Robert Liu-Trujillo
Rosaline by Daniel Errico, illustrated by Michael Scanlon
Uh-Oh! by Shutta Crum, illustrated by Patrice Barton
Worm Loves Worm by J. J. Austrian, illustrated by Mike Curato
Yetta & the Fantastic Mom Suits by Jano Oscherwitz

2017

47,000 beads by Koja Adeyoha and Angel Adeyoha, illustrated by Holly McGillis
Bell’s Knock Knock Birthday! by George Parker, illustrated by Sam Orchard
Families by Jesse Unaapik Mike, Kerry McCluskey, illustrated by Lenny Lishchenko
From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea by Kai Cheng Thom, illustrated by Li Kai Yun Ching and Wai-Yant Li
The Gender Wheel by Maya Gonzalez
The Last Place You Look by j wallace skelton, illustrated by Justin Alves
Moon Dragon in the Mosque Garden by El-Farouk Khaki and Troy Jackson, illustrated by Katie Commodore
Rachel’s Christmas Boat by Sophie Labelle
Rumplepimple Goes to Jail by Suzanne DeWitt Hall, illustrated by Kevin Scott Gieman
Santa’s Husband by Daniel Kibblesmith, illustrated by Ap Quach
Sparkle Boy by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Maria Mola
Super Power Baby Shower by Tobi Hill-Meyer and Fay Onyx, illustrated by Janine Carrington
They, She, He, Me: Free to Be! by Maya Gonzalez and Matthew Smith-Gonzalez
When You Look Out the Window: How Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Built a Community by Gayle E. Pitman, illustrated by Christopher Lyles

2018

A Church for All by Gayle E. Pitman, illustrated by Laure Fournier
A House for Everyone by Jo Hirst, illustrated by Naomi Bardoff
Jack (Not Jackie) by Erica Silverman, illustrated by Holly Hatam
Jamie Is Jamie: A Book About Being Yourself and Playing your Way by Afsaneh Moradian, illustrated by Maria Bogade
Jerome by Heart by Thomas Scotto, illustrated by Olivier Tallec
Jessie’s Hat Collection by Nick Barnes
Julían Is a Mermaid by Jessica Love
Love Is Love by Michael Genhart, illustrated by Ken Min
Neither by Airlie Anderson
Phoenix Goes to School by Michelle and Phoenix Finch, illustrated by Sharon Davey
Pink Is for Boys by Robb Pearlman, illustrated by Eda Kaban
Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag by Rob Sanders, illustrated by Steven Salerno
Prince and Knight by Daniel Haack, illustrated by Stevie Lewis
Vincent the Vixen by Alice Reeves, illustrated by Phoebe Kirk
"What’s ‘Gay’?” Asked Mae by Brian McNaught, illustrated by Dave Woodford
When We Love Someone We Sing to Them/ Cuando amamos cantamos by Ernesto Javier Martinez, illustrated by Maya Christina Gonzalez
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