

Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence
edited by Marion Dane Bauer

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Grade Levels and Audience:

Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence (1994) edited by Marion Dane Bauer presents issues of adolescence and homosexuality in a valuable anthology of short stories. Christine Jenkins (1994, June), reviewing the book for the School Library Journal congratulates the authors for successfully conveying “the very mixed emotions that accompany the acceptance of sexual difference at any age that places a high value on conformity to an established norm.” She recommends the collection for seventh graders and up. (p. 144)

Reviewers in The Horn Book Magazine (1994, July/August) note that the sixteen short stories are important statements “about the resilience and hope of adolescents. As a group they form a powerful commentary about our social and emotional responses to homosexuality and our human need for love and acceptance. A remarkable and welcome collection.” They remark that though these stories have homosexuality as a common theme, they are “also stories of love, coming of age, adventure, and self-discovery. This book is recommended for readers “ages 12 through Young Adult.” (p. 457)

Introduction:

Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence is a collection of short stories for young adults which addresses issues of homosexuality. Some of the protagonists have gay friends or family members, like Willie in “Holding.” Some of these young adults are discovering that they feel attracted to people of the same sex and are questioning their sexual orientation, as in the title story. Others, like the young people in “Parents’ Night,” have determined that they are homosexual and now must confront society, family, and friends.

These stories are upbeat and positive. The reader feels compassion and pride for these sincere young people who are simply trying to find acceptance, approval, and love. These stories give readers the hope that the world will finally be kind to every sort of person, and that homosexual adolescents will retain the power to cope during adolescence to conduct meaningful, satisfying adulthoods.

One feature of this collection that is particularly rich is the author commentary. Marion Dane Bauer's introduction is moving. She gets right to the point when she cites suicide statistics of adolescents. One out of three teenage suicides, she states, is linked to concerns about the victim's homosexuality. She further points out that teachers have the responsibility of helping the student who is suffering, maybe dying, from lack of information.

Not all of the authors represented in this collection are homosexual, but all share a concern for adolescents to acquire a broad view of life and people; that without accurate, inclusive information about sexuality, our society will continue to harbor pockets of fear and hatred toward those whose conduct does not match a perceived norm. Each of the stories includes a short statement from the author. Some comment on their own lives and careers, discussing their own writing process. A few of the authors have written fairly extensive commentaries. Gregory Maguire talks about the journeys of his life, literal and figurative. He wrote his story, "The Honorary Shepherds" after watching friends struggle and die from AIDS and says the story "was born of a conviction: As individuals have the power to break away from their origins, so they have the power to maintain and strengthen the ties that nourish them." (Bauer, p. 83)

Plot Summaries of 16 short stories:

1. "Am I Blue" by Bruce Coville — A fairygodfather named Melvin helps Vince deal with his sexual confusion. Vince has been "gay-bashed" by Bruce Corrigan, the school bully and Melvin comes to his aid. Eventually Vince gets three wishes. His final wish is that all the gays in the world turn blue. We see by color shading how wide spread homosexuality is, from light blue to dark blue. Not surprisingly, the great homophobe Bruce Corrigan is "blue as a summer sky." At the end, Vince is still undecided about his sexual identity, but much more comfortable with himself. Very funny, touching, warm story.
2. "We Might As Well Be Strangers" by M.E. Kerr— Deals with broader issues of prejudice, particularly anti-semitism. Alison writes in her diary about coming out to her grandmother, a Jew who escaped from Nazi Germany. The grandmother shows compassion and understanding in how she relates to Alison's suffering. Alison's mother is struggling with Alison's sexual identity. This book deals honestly with how real families struggle when an adolescent child talks about being gay. Alison is able to cope with her mothers homophobia with the wisdom of the oppressed.
3. "Winnie and Tommy" by Francesca Lia Block—Winnie and Tommy have been going together for a year. They are great friends. During a weekend trip to San Francisco after high school graduation, Tommy comes out to Winnie. Winnie is heartbroken, Tommy leaves and stays away all night. When Tommy returns, Winnie is able to demonstrate to Tommy that she can shift her feelings to the kind of friendship Tommy really needs. Tommy will always love Winnie,

he says, though he can only be her best friend, not her lover. This is a story of growing up, love, friendship, and loyalty.

4. “Slipping Away” by Jacqueline Woodson—Mother/Daughter relationships and friendships are explored in this story. Jacina wonders if her best “summer friend” Maria is outgrowing their friendship. Jacina senses that her emerging sexuality sets her apart from Maria. Maria doesn’t share Jacina’s acceptance of lesbians. Jacina’s feelings for Maria are much stronger and apparently more physical than Maria’s for Jacina. Maria “slips away.” This is a subtle, sensitive story of childhood transition into adolescence, and how it affects this special friendship.

5. “The Honorary Shepherds” by Gregory Maguire—This story has a unique structure: cinematic and dramatic in effect. The protagonists have multi-ethnic-racial backgrounds. They are both gay and first become friends in their film class. Their friendship grows as they develop a wonderful project for their class. This story deals with myth, religion, friendship, and death. It has a great role model: Ms. Cabbage, their film teacher who is teaching enthusiastically as she is simultaneously dying from cancer.

6. “Running” by Ellen Howard—About a family that harbors a young lesbian whose own family has kicked her out. This story is about friendship, families, and courage. It’s message is about how our biases are really born of ignorance. Once we know and understand someone, our point of view will change. As the younger sister in this family learns to care deeply for the visitor she re-examines her own understanding of friendship.

7. “Three Mondays in July” by James Cross Giblin—This story has a haunting, almost mysterious quality to it, though it is not a mystery. It’s the story of a young man questioning his sexual identity in 1951. He’s a sad and lonely person, alone with his realization. His loneliness is relieved, however, when an older man that David has been spying on at the beach takes the time to talk with him. The man is kind and listens to David confess his unusual interest in men. The man comforts David with words that give him hope and happiness. “You are not alone,” he says

8. “Parents Night” by Nancy Garden —Is about some courageous high school students who want to represent their club’s booth on Parent’s Night. The booth, however, is controversial, and they’re afraid. The Gay-Straight-Bisexual club members suffer some insults and prejudice, but they prevail and are able to open their booth for the night. The characters’ interactions with family and friends reveal many of the common misconceptions and biases about non-heterosexuality. Karen struggles with her parents, but in the end they make valiant, heart-felt moves toward Karen’s point of view. This story is one of the most moving and informative in the collection.

9. “Michael’s Little Sister” by C.S. Adler—16-year old Michael has a good friendship with his sister Becky. Michael is also Becky’s idol. Becky is ten years old and has heard some other kids calling her brother a faggot. Becky wants to

know if this is true, but Michael denies it. After Becky witnesses a kiss between Michael and his first male date, Walt, she tells her brother that it's okay to be gay, to be different. Other themes in this story are single parenting and maturity. The mother in this story has to work a lot because the father is dead. Michael becomes surrogate father and house-husband at a young age.

10. "Supper" by Leslea Newman— Meryl, and her family which include grandmother, mother, and brother reveal some of the family dynamics that encourage eating disorders as related to the beauty myth. For instance, the grandmother insists that Meryl take some of her meat because Meryl won't be attractive to boys. Grandmother also remarks on her own body image—too fat, she remarks. Newman creates a stereotypical "Jewish family" dynamic with the grandmother as matriarch. From this introductory scene, Newman reveals that Meryl hiding a secret from her grandmother who wants her to be appealing to boys: she is not interested in boys. Meryl's friend Patty shows her the techniques involved in making out under the pretense that Meryl would enjoy boys if she knew what to do. Meryl discovers that practicing with Patty is pleasurable. Meryl experiences an inner dissonance which is manifested as the early stage of an eating disorder.

11. "Holding" by Lois Lowry—This poignant story is about a teenage boy who has kept his father's partner's identity a secret for years. When the partner dies, Willie finds a new respect for his father, and realizes that he has been living a lie. Willie also remembers Chris with a newfound fondness and regard. When Willie returns to school after staying with his father following Chris's death, he finds the courage to explain the truth to his best friend who is very accepting and supportive.

12. "Blood Sister" by Jane Yolen—a fantasy about Amazon women. A woman warrior comes of age in this dark and mystical story. This is more a story of how an adolescent goes about finding a place in society. Selma comes to terms with her culture and its myths as she discovers her own individuality and identity.

13. "Hands" by Jonathan London—Ray Marlow is a poet who has read for Lon's English class. Lon and Ray develop a warm acquaintanceship. Once they bump into each other on a bus and in the ensuing conversation Lon learns a little about Ray's life. Ray's teaching career was ruined when a male student falsely accused him of "fondling." Lon and Ray continue their discussion, sharing an interest in writing. Lon learns about the cruelty of life as he sees his proud, courageous, talented friend die from AIDS. Lon is the beneficiary of Ray's kindness and sensitivity, learning that he also belongs to this sub-culture of artists, poets, writers, musicians, and others who live full, satisfying lives.

14. "50% Chance of Lightning" by Cristina Salat—Malia and Robin are best friends who illustrate typical contemporary adolescent girls. Malia is heterosexual and Robin is gay. They are both concerned with establishing solid love relationships and planning their futures. Malia has a boyfriend, is enthusiastic about going to college, and even has a list of life goals. Robin is

impressed. Robin worries because she doesn't really want to go to college and has no idea what life has in store for her. Robin is clear about her sexuality, but has never had a sexual relationship. When a lesbian approaches Robin at a party, Robin recoils, even though she is restless and curious about sexual discovery. Robin, though confused about the choices life holds for her, is not recklessly experimental. She holds out for someone she truly cares for. This story captures Robin as she "writes her life list."

15. "In the Tunnels" by William Sleator— This story takes place in underground tunnels during Viet Nam. The characters are male and female Viet Nameese guerilla soldiers. This is an interesting story because it is told from the opposition point of view: Americans are their enemies. The narrator is a boy whose lover, Bay, is a famous fighter. They must keep their love secret. There is suspense and action in this unusual love story, especially when Bay is above ground conducting a mission and readers fear he'll be killed in the gunfire.

16. "Dancing Backwards" by Marion Dane Bauer—Bauer describes herself in this story about a little girl who, oblivious to the other dancers and the audience, literally dances with her back to the audience. Bauer considers her 'deviation' a strength. Later (1956), she is expelled from a Catholic private girl's Academy for trading valentines with another girl. Although the implicit accusation of lesbian activity was false, she and her friend were punished for something as minor as sending valentines to each other simply for what it suggested. In fact this accusation and school expulsion resulted in the genesis of the very activity it sought to deny.

Theoretical Support and Redeeming Values:

The literature allowed in conventional school curricula often remains elusive in terms of accessibility to contemporary youth. Teachers are safe in their school districts if they stick to classics or non-controversial young adult novels. Unfortunately, youth are by their very natures controversial beings. Many of them are at risk for a variety of reasons. Some of them don't have time to discover the connections between the conflicts of their own lives and the conflicts Odysseus is up against, for instance. In addition to traditional literature such as the Odyssey, they also deserve to have access to literature that can help them make choices that are healthy and to confront issues that reflect the contemporary culture. Literature should not be used as a template for choice making, but "books must be provided that hold out some link with the young reader's past and present preoccupations, anxieties, ambitions" (Rosenblatt, 1983 p. 72).

Marion Dane Bauer's edited short story collection, Am I Blue? provides a rich tapestry of episodes that illustrate problems contemporary youth face. The theme for the book is homosexuality and within that overall theme, readers see youth struggling with such topics as family dynamics, peer relationships, and identity seeking.

As members of the adult community which is preparing the way for contemporary young adults, today's teachers have an urgent responsibility to help them develop a broad view of the world. "If the student's structure of attitudes and ideas is built on too narrow a base of experience, he should be helped to gain broader and deeper insight through literature itself" (p.107). Sexuality is a theme that teachers can't address in meaningful ways in their school systems; yet this is probably the largest issue for most adolescents. Confronting their own emerging sexuality is a huge distraction and confusion for heterosexual youth, but what about the homosexual or bisexual youth?

In Greg Maguire's story, "The Honorary Shepherds," readers witness an exemplary teacher, Ms. Cabbage. The two homosexual protagonists, Pete and Lee meet in her class and develop a final project under her wise tutelage. Ms. Cabbage's teaching style encourages students to develop a broad view of life when she presents myth, both cultural and literary. She invites her students to "Pair off. Discuss the myths that created your sense of yourself." (Bauer, p. 73). This discussion is extended to the final assignment that Pete and Lee work on together: they write and film their version of the birth of Jesus. The characters in the film are "non-traditional." For instance, they include gay as well as female shepherds, and Mary wears contemporary garb, etc. Pete and Lee's message is, "A myth is yours only if you choose to own it. Myths, like faith, are wide and capacious and of their nature generous" (Bauer, p. 82). Pete and Lee have had a meaningful educational experience. They can accept their cultural (one boy is Puerto Rican, Irish, and Polish, and the other is Chinese and Black) and sexual uniqueness as a result of this project. This is a controversial story, and provides plenty of opportunity for interpretation and discussion. In the classroom the perceptive and responsible teacher can, with this story alone, "awaken his students to an awareness of the complexity of human behavior and society and will stimulate them to seek the understanding that the social scientists are endeavoring to establish." (Bauer, p. 143).

Why must teachers take responsibility for their students on such a personal level? In his article ("Opening up the classroom closet") Eric Rofes (1989), a California educator concerned with the problems of gay youth, aptly invokes Erik Erikson's wish that, "someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well considered and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit" (Rofes, 1989, p. 444). Because too many of today's youth never complete the steps of intellectual or moral development, they sometimes (even often) destroy themselves, or remain too long on a morally undeveloped level. This phenomenon is tragically magnified in the gay population:

The experience of being homosexual is closely related to the experiences of belonging to other minority groups . . . However, important differences exist for the homosexual youth making it probably the most difficult role to adjust to of all minority youth. With other minority adolescents, even under the worst conditions of social rejection, they have the opportunity to receive positive socialization in early childhood from parents and siblings about their subculture and

group identity. The homosexual youth typically grows up in a heterosexually oriented family which most likely has developed all of the misperceptions and prejudices against homosexuals . . . Thus, the homosexual youth grows up without the sense of “us” versus “them,” which is the essence of group identity afforded other minorities . . . Instead the gay youth is socialized into values and beliefs discordant with their self-definition (e.g., homosexuals cannot be Christians), which may lead them to a socially stigmatized role.

Gay adolescents grow up with a lack of access to accurate information or appropriate role models. They grow up acutely aware of the prejudice, discrimination, and possible violence they will face if their peers find out they are gay . . . Thus, most gay adolescents learn to hide their true self since the rewards for being gay are nonexistent and the rewards for being “normal” are so great . . . Their hidden sexual orientation creates an increasing sense of isolation as their life is based on a living lie . . . Such isolation and alienation will cause many young gays to develop a sense of inferiority and worthlessness . . . Gay youths not only risk peer rejection but they also risk family rejection . . . homosexuals find it difficult to seek help from family and friends . . . The gay adolescent generally has two options to fill the “sympathetic other” need: casual sexual contact with strangers (often adults) or help from a concerned professional . . . These youths must be considered at high risk . . . of poor academic performance, absenteeism, and dropping out of school. Their internalized homophobia may result in a low self-esteem, shame, guilt, anxiety, and depression. (Telljohann and Price, 1993, p. 42)

The American School Health Association (ASHA) adopted a resolution on gay and lesbian youth in 1990 (see appendix), having recognized the dangers this population faces (and presumably the damage the non-homosexual population can do by remaining uninformed). There are states that have included programs addressing the needs of their gay and lesbian students. There are even programs that recognize that all students should have this information, and are proactively working to cure homophobia by integrating the curriculum (Project 10, Los Angeles Unified School District, for one). “We must not view in isolation any detail of behavior in our own or any society but must study it against the background of the motives and emotions institutionalized in that culture.” (Rosenblatt, p. 152)

Adolescents who read Am I Blue will see how some families deal with homosexuality. They will also see how some school systems respect the rights of their homosexual students. In Kerr’s “We Might As Well be Strangers,” Alison finds a sympathetic ally in her grandmother, but Alison’s mother cannot come to terms with her when she “comes out.” Alison’s Jewish grandmother can relate to Alison because she was a victim of discrimination in Germany during WWII. Alison’s mother expresses sentiments that Alison could very well resent and hate. She does feel alienated from her mother, but because of her loving grandmother, she can endure her mother’s fears. Alison and her grandmother

are the appealing characters in this story, the mother is in fact the stranger [though anyone who has had a mother and been an adolescent will recognize her]. However, the reader and Alison have hope for her mother when the author concludes the story by saying, "All coming out stories are a continuing process. Strangers take a long time to become acquainted, particularly when they are from the same family" (Bauer, p. 27). Alison, were she less mature, less supported by her grandmother, could very well be a casualty of maternal homophobia, but she is strong, a role model for teenage girls who are struggling with their own mothers. Alison's character provides a literary model for real life conflict. The story also provides for the reader "the possibility of compensating for lacks or failures through identification with a character who possesses qualities other than our own or who makes fuller use of capacities similar to our own" (Rosenblatt, p. 40).

Nancy Garden's "Parent's Night" is the story of a very close-knit family that begins to unravel when their daughter comes out. Karen's parents go through agony but finally accept the facts, even showing up at Parent's Night where Karen is representing the Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance Club. The school in this story supports their students' rights to freedom of speech in accordance with the recommendations made in the ASHA's declaration of student rights, particularly: "Whereas, the educational system in the United States traditionally has been expected to provide instructional and support programs which meet the needs of diverse groups within the student population and to discourage discrimination against individuals based on group membership" (Telljohann and Price, p. 54).

Havighurst's (1969) Developmental tasks are covered most comprehensively in Jane Yolen's story, "Blood Sister." This intriguing and ancient-sounding tale will enthrall young adults who have an interest in historical fiction, science fiction, or mythology. This story has qualities of each genre. Of the entire collection, this story is the only one that takes place in an imaginary culture. Yolen constructs an amazonian society of women whose mythology is so intimately woven in the daily life of the people, that it is difficult to distinguish realities, or dimensions. Yolen even creates a piece of "historical" documentation to validate the culture and the tribe. The story revolves around a young warrior named Selna as she comes to terms with the loss of her blood sister, Marda, who has gone "missioning." Selna must also learn to accept her tribal role as warrior, and her "calling out" of her dark sister, Marjo aids her in the transition ritual: When a young woman is ready to come of age in this culture, she "calls out" her dark sister to help her in her quest for womanhood. In this way, Marjo helps Selna kill the lioness. Selna accepts her warrior role and returns home to her mother who has been grieving for Selna, thinking she has been lost. When Selna returns she proves to her tribe and herself that she has achieved emotional independence, returns to claim membership in her society, and her place in it as a woman-warrior.

Joseph Cady (1992), a teacher of literature and medicine at the University of Rochester Medical School and gay and lesbian literature the New School for Social Research believes that, "if taught in a way that exposes students

extensively and closely to its texts, homosexual literature can “subvert” the long-standing cultural notion that homosexuality is and should remain “unspeakable” and “untouchable.” (Cady, 1992, p. 89) This notion is an understatement of how homosexuality was viewed until about 20 years ago when systematic change in society’s attitudes began taking place.

In 1974, the American Psychiatric Association deleted homosexuality from the Diagnostic Systems Manua III. The purpose of the change was to remove the stigma associated with homosexuality . . . Homosexuality has been considered a form of mental illness, morally wrong and socially deviant . . . it is proposed that how one interprets the morality of homosexuality will depend upon one’s level of moral development according to Kohlberg’s theory (Boothe, 1993, p. 77).

Boothe further points out that supporters of homosexuality claim that condemnation of homosexuality stems from homophobia,

a form of mental illness often reaching proportions of mass hysteria underlying most of the institutions and attitudes used to oppress and degrade gay people (Marcourt, 1977, p. 40) . . . this fear can be traced to the Sodom and Gomorrah story: Homosexuality was connected with idolatry, rape, and promiscuity; therefore, serious sanctions ensued against same-sex relations . . . may writers support the view that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality towards Lot’s guests, not homosexuality. (Boothe, p. 78)

Boothe draws from other researchers to determine the biblical origins of prohibitions against homosexuality when she suggests that “the intensification of norms and restrictions in Jewish culture resulted from a desire to resist assimilation of surrounding, “alien” cultures. Because it was imperative for the Jews to separate themselves from the practices of the Canaanites and Babylonians, who practiced homosexuality and idol worship, the laws in Leviticus were created. Leviticus is a chronicle of laws created to serve the needs of the Hebrews and many of the laws have been abandoned or updated (like contact with menstruating women): “The biblical materials are always contingent in the sense that they are always the products of specific cultures and therefore of specific cultural understanding so that their status as “revelation” for us now has to be argued at every particular point. (Marcourt 1977, p. 102)” (Boothe, p. 81).

Clearly, the most likely subject to be challenged, especially in the public school forum, is homosexuality. Most readers have heard the homophobic arguments. Perhaps the one most apt to be voiced comes from the notion that homosexuality is contagious, or that homosexuals ‘recruit’: that if children know (read) about homosexuality they will become gay. [If in fact a student knows about homosexuality *and* determines that she or he is gay, then maybe the literature allowed the process to be less pain-filled than the experiences of many adolescents.] The theory that knowing about homosexuality *encourages* it is a bit

like saying, knowing about heterosexuality encourages it. *It is there, in all of us. It is sexuality: a normal, healthy development that takes place during adolescence. How our sexuality evolves is affected by biology and culture. To say that sexuality is purely biological or cultural is to fall into essentialism or reductionism. It is true that human sexuality and gender expression is a part of a larger social, historical, and cultural reality that encompasses an individual's self-perception and intention. To seek an explanation for homosexuality is to operate from the premise that homosexuality is an aberration, that heterosexuality is the biological "given."*

To say that a person is homosexual is a statement about an individual in a particular social context at a particular point in that person's life. There is no biological basis for dividing individuals into two dichotomous groups, heterosexual vs. homosexual. The individual does have a sexual urge. But that urge can be renounced and suppressed, it can be channeled exclusively into procreation, it can be directed toward humans, animals, and inanimate objects, it can become the central focus of one's life and identity, it can be sublimated and so on. As an isolated biological phenomenon it sets no specific, preordained limits or direction for sexual and gender expression. Unlike the sexual urge, homosexuality is not a material aspect of an individual. (De Cecco and Elia 1993, p. 10)

The problems we face in understanding and sorting out human behavior are enormous. Social values permeate the sciences (even the hard sciences) and purely objective reporting in scientific journals is not currently the rule, even though it is the guiding principle. Until minds are opened and evidence is viewed, truth will not be available in the searches for meaning.

The attractions of the notion of a biologically determined homosexuality is one that has made curious allies of such scientists as Doerner, who views homosexuality as a potentially preventable neuroendocrine disorder, and sociologists such as Whitam and Harry, who see an essentialist formulation as a strong political argument for "gay rights." This belief is not new. A century ago, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs used it in an attempt to change Prussian laws against sodomy. Both cultural biases and political considerations have long been a part of scientific formulations of homosexuality. Whether well-intended or not, such intrusions can only hamper our understandings of the complexities of human sexuality. (DeCecco and Elia, p. 43)

Literary Qualities and Summary of Reviews:

Cathi Dunn MacRae (1994) reviewed *Am I Blue?* in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* with the hope that gay teens will find themselves in these stories, while "straight" readers might come to understand their gay peers." She points to "Bruce Coville's arresting title story [which] combines wit and pathos to inspire such

awareness, as “fairy” godfather Melvin rescues a young victim of gay bashing, a la Clarence the angel in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*. When Melvin fulfills the boy’s wish to see gay people revealed by turning their skin blue, an unforgettable point is made: the many gays among us are ordinary people.” MacRae goes on to laud Gregory Maguire’s experimental literary form “to reflect media’s effect on youth, as two boys produce a video of their Christmas myth featuring gay shepherds in “The Honorary Shepherds.” In her article she also reminds the reader of the recent burning in Kansas of Nancy Garden’s story, Annie on My Mind when she remarks on Garden’s contribution of “Parent’s Night” in which a very brave group of students run a fair booth for their gay organization. The article declares that “[t]his fine anthology includes M.E. Kerr, Lois Lowry, William Sleator, and others, achieving rare cohesiveness as its varied voices harmonize” (p. 116).

In Kirkus Reviews (15 June, 1994), Am I Blue? is praised for its interesting author entries and for the quality and variety of stories. Bruce Coville’s story “is wonderfully campy and humorous.” The review notes that the young gay readers of these stories will be helped to “understand their sexuality and accept themselves.” This collection is a “book that belongs in every YA collection” (p. 840).

(As noted in the introduction) A reviewer in The Horn Book Magazine (1994) acknowledges Am I Blue? for being an “exciting, moving, collection.” It points out that while “all the stories center on themes of coming to terms with homosexuality, they also are stories of love, coming of age, adventure, and self-discovery. The review particularly identifies Lois Lowry’s story “Holding” saying it “is a powerful tale of a teenage boy admitting to his friend that his father’s live-in, Chris, is a man. As in many of the stories, the final cost of deception is much higher than the repercussions of truth.” The review continues by saying that “the stories vary in tone, style, and genre — from Jane Yolen’s fantasy, set in an all-female culture, to Nancy Garden’s modern realistic story about high school members of a student group, the Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance, who struggle for the bravery to stand at a booth on Parents’ Night. Taken individually, the stories are strong statements about the resilience and hope of adolescents. As a group they form a powerful commentary about our social and emotional responses to homosexuality and our human need for love and acceptance. A remarkable and welcome collection” (p. 457).

Stephanie Zvirin (1994), writing for the Booklist, reviewed Am I Blue? noting that the stories “go beyond struggle and stereotype to show individuality, pride, and affection.” Additionally, she says that a portion of the proceeds for this “important book” will be shared with the Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Zin also finds Coville’s story (the title story) “campy, humorous, pointed and messagey” but questions whether it might have been more effective if it had been placed elsewhere in the collection. “As leadoff to the anthology, it gives readers the impression they’re in for sermons, not good storytelling, and nothing could be further from the truth. Bauer’s anthology, with stories recognizing both the physical and emotional pull of being gay or lesbian, includes a number of particularly good selections.” Two authors

represented in the collection that Zin particularly seems to admire are Lowry (1994, p. 175) and Giblin (1994, p. 105) (p. 1598).

(as noted in the introduction) Chris Jenkins (1994), in the School Library Journal describes the author afterwords as ranging from “ho-hum to fascinating.” Stating that the best reveal ways in which gay/lesbian issues or individuals have touched the authors’ lives. The review also determines that most of the stories “feature white, middle-class, suburban/urban milieus, although several stories have a more diverse cast than is generally found in YA fiction.” The reviewers do feel that the young adults are portrayed accurately in most of the tales. “As is the case with most short story collections, the overall quality is uneven, but the best stories are memorable. They speak of survival and hope: they say, like the man on the beach in Gilbin’s story, “You’re not alone” (p. 144).

The New Advocate (Fall, 1994) found the collection represented some of the “finest short stories in print.” It notes the excellent quality and theme of the stories, finally praising the book as an “outstanding one that should hold much appeal and many rewards” (p. 297).

As evidenced by the respect shown by the above reviewers, Am I Blue? clearly addresses the criteria generally agreed upon and outlined in D. Pettitt’s (1961) dissertation. Although this is not a novel, it fulfills many of the categories she explores: a) main characters are struggling against their society, families, themselves, or some other force; b) main characters signify some universal truth such as unconditional love, and how it comes into question when families and support structures condemn a youth who challenges its conventions; c) the authors clearly convince the readers of the point of view in each story, using specificity, detail, and attendance to the integrity of the short story structure (Sacco, 1996, p. 14-28)

Objectives, Teaching Methods, and Assignments:

Suggested Teaching Objectives:

- 1) Students will be able to understand that homosexuality is not a “condition” or a mystery.
- 2) Students will empathize with the protagonists.
- 3) Students will explore family interaction/dynamics.
- 4) Students can explore issues of cultural pressure and construction of gender roles.
- 5) Students can see how individual realities are derived from or determined by present and past social and political tensions and issues.
- 6) Students should gain perception into different dimensions of growing up.

7) Students should learn ways of thinking and arguing about social issues that deal with repression, oppression, and suppression of particular groups. What responsibilities do governments have in protecting the rights of citizens. How do governments and legal systems adjust to changing social perspectives?

8) What exactly is social injustice? Students will explore the ways in which social injustices can be corrected. They should gain insights into the roles citizens play in creating solutions for social inequities. What is personal responsibility?

Essay or Discussion Questions:

Choose two families represented in the collection. How does homosexuality affect each family? Remember to take into account as much context as possible (life style, social status, family members, etc.)

How does David show that he has changed in the story Three Mondays in July. Does the “mood” Gilpin creates change also? What do you think growing up gay in the fifties might have been like? What has changed if anything, do you think?

Respond to Marion Dane Bauer’s statement: “...it never occurred to me to check anything except my own inner sense of direction. Not once. Even when I knew my inner sense of direction was confused.” Relate your response to the story.

When you were a young child, did you ever feel that being regarded as “cute” was insulting and/or inappropriate? (re: “Dancing Backwards,” again).

Myth is an important theme in “The Honorary Shepherds.” Describe the differences between popular mythology and traditional (or literary) mythology referred to in the story. How does myth figure in your own life?

Do you know of any instances of “gay bashing?” Can you explain why gay bashing occurs?

Explore the relationships between Alison, her mother, and her grandmother in “We Might as Well All be Strangers.” What is your prediction for Alison and her mother—will Alison be able to “win her mother over?” Is it just a matter of time, or is it hopeless?

In “Running,” Sheila needs to “make it on her own,” and in a way, so does Terry. How are their problems different and alike? What do you think will happen to them? Do you admire either or both of them? Explain.

Pick some of your favorite characters—or some you found more intriguing than others and place them in a different episode, one you make up. How do they react in a completely different setting? Can you write a new story and adapt any of the characters from Am I Blue?

Research project options:

- 1) Research the history of a minority group.
- 2) Research gay/lesbian issues.
- 3) Investigate censorship of books that depict same sex relationships.
- 4) Oppression: the exercise of power or authority in a cruel or unjust manner
Repression: to check or inhibit
Explore how these two levels of power have affected homosexuals or another group that you want to research.
- 5) Research the history of sex-education in this country's public education system.
- 6) Some of the stories in Am I Blue? refer to the Holocaust. Write a report on the history of the Jews.
- 7) Write a biography of someone in your community who works with, or is served by, a support group. What groups in your community, state, or region receive some kind of help from a government service or volunteer support group? Be sure to investigate hot issues like, how much assistance should minority groups receive from tax dollars? Does affirmative action help reduce discrimination? How do/should societies decide who qualifies for help?
- 8) Investigate public policies regarding assistance for minority groups in a country of your choice.

Possible Objections:

In general, Am I Blue? does not seem a likely target for censorship outside of the theme of homosexuality. However, the following list provides a glimpse at some of the issues presented in the collection:

- sexuality
- conflicts between parents and children
- conflicts between authority and children
- teenage alcohol consumption
- divorce, single parent homes
- same sex parenting
- The Viet Nam War
- racial and ethnic diversity in families
- nudity

Why Am I Blue? Should be Allowed:

This collection allows students to learn about and discuss a topic that traditionally has been restricted. The topic of homosexuality has been seen as deviant, mysterious, and threatening. These stories are wholesome and honest, providing opportunities to examine how society repeatedly creates monsters out of mysteries and applies bias and prejudice in the absence of understanding.

The stories in Am I Blue? are well-constructed, tasteful, and thoughtful. These are stories that inform issues of homosexuality as well as a variety of other issues that afford opportunities for discussion and literary exploration. This collection could be employed to reach the goal of providing ‘the best kind of equipment’ for contemporary youth, for “obviously, a rigid set of dogmatic ideas and fixed responses to specific conditions is the worst kind of equipment for the contemporary youth.” (Rosenblatt, p. 129) If teachers respect their students as individuals, then they must understand that the need for the individual to work out his own principles and his own hierarchy of values is imperative.” (Rosenblatt, p. 131) education should “supply him with the knowledge, the mental habits, and the emotional impetus that will enable him to independently solve his problems...” (Rosenblatt, p. 131). And, as maturing adults, “Youth need the knowledge and the intellectual tools required for objective appraisal of ideals and social mechanisms — new and old” (Rosenblatt, p. 180) that a collection like this one can help build.

Any teacher contemplating the implications of a proactive teaching ethic will want to be prepared for a challenge to this book. Two helpful pamphlets that can backup the teacher’s argument and brief her for the sorts of criticism she is likely to hear are “A Student’s Right to Read” (NCTE, 1982) and “Common Ground” (NCTE, 1993). “Common Ground” includes a list of familiar phrases self-censoring teachers often use in addition to the arguments common to censorship organizations. “A Student’s Right to Read” is a constitution for teachers to refer to in establishing fundamental classroom reading ethics. Contacting the NCTE or ALAN can put a teacher in touch with other resources. An excellent list of such resources can be found in Chapter 15 of Jean Brown’s (1994) edited collection, Preserving Intellectual Freedom (Brown 1994, p. 151-163).

The fact that Am I Blue? offers so many rich teaching topics and themes to explore in the classroom will not be adequate defense against homophobes and district administrators whose ethical standards often stand on a belief in keeping the educational boat from rocking. However, “Self-censorship happens when teachers “select” instructional materials based upon fear of challenges rather than on the merit and instructional value of the materials (Brown and Stephens 1994, p. 127). Clearly, if a school district has not already done so, establishing an Intellectual Freedom Group (IFG) composed of librarians, teachers, and administrators, is essential (p. 128).

The charge of such a group would be to assemble a persuasive artillery of documentation that supports literature which explores issues that are still considered threatening by some. Additionally, such a group would serve as a forum to determine criteria for school materials. Putting such a group in place serves to send a clear and assertive message to the public that their school district

believes in intellectual freedom and access to information. It would also send a message to teachers that they are supported and encouraged in their teaching activities.

The school community should feel proud of its progressive and open approach to education and the greater community needs to know that their school has “nothing to hide” (Brown and Stephens, p. 131). All members of a community must understand that if any idea is repressed, then the people are being oppressed. If you shut the cover on a book about an adolescent coming out of the closet, then you close the door on democracy.

Alternative Books:

Books about the Holocaust:

The following notes were taken from Miami University's Sherlock on-line library information system.

Baer, Edith. (1988). A frost in the night. NY: Schocken Books.

Begley, Louis. (1991). Wartime lies. NY: Knopf.

Cormier, Robert. (1992). Tunes for bears to dance to. NY: Delacorte.
Eleven-year-old Henry escapes his family's problems by watching the woodcarving of Mr. Levine, an elderly Holocaust survivor, but when Henry is manipulated into betraying his friend he comes to know true evil.

Fink, Ida. (1987). A scrap of time: And other stories. NY: Panthion Books.

Laird, Christa. (1990). Shadow of the wall. NY: Greenwillow. Living with his mother and two sisters in the Warsaw Ghetto, Misha is befriended by the director of the orphanage, Dr. Korczak, and finds a purpose to his life when he joins a resistance organization.

Lowry, Lois. (1989). Number the stars. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Books.
In 1943, during the German occupation of Denmark, ten-year-old Annemarie learns how to be brave and courageous when she helps shelter her Jewish friend from the Nazis.

Matas, Carol. (1990). Code name Kris. NY: Scribner's. After the Nazi occupation of Denmark forces his Jewish friends to flee the country, seventeen-year-old Jesper continues to work in the underground resistance movement. Sequel to "Lisa's War."

Murpango, Michael. (1991). Waiting for Anya. NY: Viking. As the Germans establish an outpost in town, Jo helps another outpost, one consisting of a growing band of Jewish children.

Provost, Gary. (1988). David and Max. NY: Jewish Publishing Society.

Roth-Hano, Renee. (1988). Touch wood: A girlhood in occupied France. NY: Four Winds/MacMillan. In this autobiographical novel set in Nazi-occupied France, Renee, a young Jewish girl, and her family flee their home in Alsace and live a precarious existence in Paris until Renee and her sister escape to the shelter of a convent in Normandy.

Schaeffer, Susan F. (1974). Anya. NY: MacMillan.

Yolen, Jane. (1992). Briar rose. NY: Tor.

Yolen, Jane. (1988). The devil's arithmetic. NY: Viking, Penguin.

Gay and Lesbian Alternative Books

Childress, Alice. (1989). Those other people. NY: Putnam. Bigotry surfaces at Minitown High when a popular male teacher sexually assaults a delinquent fifteen-year-old girl and the only witnesses are a black boy and a gay student teacher.

Covington, Vicki. (1988). Gathering Home. NY: Simon and Schuster.

Garden, Nancy. (1992). Annie on my mind. NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. Liza puts aside her feelings for Annie after the disaster at school, but eventually she allows love to triumph over the ignorance of people.

Homes, A.M. (1989). Jack. NY: MacMillan.

Kerr, M.E. (1994). Deliver us from Evie. NY: HarperCollins. Sixteen-year-old Parr Burrman and his family face some difficult times when word spreads through their rural Missouri town that his older sister is a lesbian, and she leaves the family farm to live with the daughter of the town's banker.

Kerr, M.E. (1986). Night kites. NY: HarperCollins. Seventeen-year-old Erick's comfortable and well-ordered life begins to fall apart when he is forced to keep two secrets: the identity of his new girlfriend and the nature of his brother's debilitating disease.

Klein, Norma. (1988). Now that I know. NY: Bantam.

Koertge, Ron. (1988). The Arizona kid. Boston: Little, Brown. Sixteen-year-old Billy spends the summer with his gay uncle in Tucson and works at a racetrack where he falls in love with an outspoken horse exerciser named Cara Mae.

Schaeffer, Susan F. (1974). Anya. NY: McMillan.

Shannon, George. (1989). Unlived affections. New York: Harper & Row. At his grandmother's death, seventeen-year-old Willie finds a box of old letters which explain many family secrets.

Woodson, J. (1995). From the notebooks of melaninsun. NY: Scholastic. Fourteen-year-old MelaninSun's comfortable, quiet life is shattered when his mother reveals she has fallen in love with a woman.

Woodson, J. (1991). The dear one. NY: Delacorte Press. Twelve-year-old Feni has to adjust when the pregnant young daughter of an old friend of her mother's comes to stay with them.

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Appendix: Resolution on Gay and Lesbian Youth in Schools

WHEREAS, the educational system in the United States traditionally has been expected to provide instructional and support programs which meet the needs of diverse groups within the student population and to discourage discrimination against individuals based on group membership;

WHEREAS, of the millions of young people between the ages of 10 and 20 in the United States, a significant number are believed to be predominantly or exclusively homosexual;

WHEREAS, research indicates that sexual orientation may be established before birth or is developed between the ages of three and nine;

WHEREAS, the report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide states that gay teenagers are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide.

WHEREAS, In a recent study of lesbians and gay men by the National Gay Task Force, one-fifth of the females and nearly half of the males reported they were harassed, threatened with violence, or physically assaulted in high school or junior high because they were perceived to be lesbian or gay;

WHEREAS, unlike other oppressed minorities, gay youth often do not have the support of family and peers;

Therefore, be it resolved that the American School Health Association believes that school personnel should demonstrate respect for the dignity and worth of all students.

Be it further resolved the Association believes that all young persons should have an equal opportunity for quality education regardless of their sexual orientation.

that curriculum materials, teaching strategies, and school policies that do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation should be implemented in schools;

that sexual orientation should be addressed in the sexuality component of a comprehensive health instruction curriculum;

that school personnel should discourage any sexually oriented deprecating, harassing, and prejudicial statements injurious to students' self-esteem;

that every school district should provide access to professional counseling by specially trained personnel for students who may be concerned about sexual orientation.