

An Interview with Alex Sanchez, Author of *Rainbow Boys*

Toby Emert

Alex Sanchez is surprised by the wealth of attention his first book, *Rainbow Boys*, has received since it was released by Simon and Schuster in October, 2001. It has been called the “best gay youth book of the year” and it recently landed on the list of Best Books for Young Adults as judged by the Young Adult Library Services Association. *Rainbow Boys* chronicles the lives of three high school seniors, Kyle Meeks, Nelson Glassman, and Jason Carrillo, young men who struggle to manage their issues about sexual identity and coming out to themselves, to each other, and to the world.

Smart and athletic Kyle has an enormous infatuation with Jason, one of the most popular boys in school. To complicate matters, Nelson, Kyle’s best friend, secretly longs for their friendship to be more than platonic. Nelson is the “school fag.” He’s flamboyant, outspoken, and works hard to establish a Gay Straight Alliance. Kyle cares deeply about Nelson, but he finds himself extraordinarily attracted to Jason, who has a girlfriend and what appears

to be the perfect high school life. Jason knows that he likes Kyle, but he can’t reconcile the expectations he’s always had for himself with his growing realization that he may be gay.

Part of the appeal of *Rainbow Boys* is the novel’s compelling storytelling. Sanchez has created tight and complicated situations for his characters. From their peers and their families, they face obstacles that most gay, lesbian, and questioning youth will recognize: ostracism, bouts of confusion and self-hatred, and verbal and physical abuse. Furthermore, they have few allies or role models; they aren’t free to talk with parents or teachers or understanding friends. The conflicts are real and the stakes are high.

Sanchez, who was born in Mexico City to parents of Cuban and German heritage, and who moved to the United States when he was five, says the book has been percolating for many years. He talked to me about how this story came to life and the impact it is having on his readers and on his own life.

TE: What’s the history of *Rainbow Boys* in terms of its lifeline? How long did you work on it? How did it come to be published?

AS: Ironically, I began *Rainbow Boys* the year I left work as a youth counselor and moved into human resources. I guess I needed some perspective, but I never imagined the book would take five years to write! From what I’ve learned since, that’s average for first novels. Much of that time is spent learning HOW to write a novel.

During those five years I took workshops to improve my writing. An instructor who liked my work recommended me to her agent, Miriam Altshuler. When Miriam and I talked, she said that what attracted her—a straight suburban mom—to the manuscript were its themes of tolerance, acceptance, and personal integrity. She said it’s the type of book she hopes her kids will read when they’re teenagers. She was a huge champion of the manuscript and had the contacts to access leading publishers.

TE: Could you have written this book ten years ago? I’m thinking about how much American culture has changed in the past decade with regard to awareness of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (glbt) issues. Is there something happening now that makes *Rainbow Boys* especially relevant? I have a feeling there is.

AS: The story lines and characters would’ve been very different ten years ago. Then, only a handful of gays and

lesbians came out as teenagers; the process was almost entirely limited to adults. But since then, a sea of change has occurred. Now, the average age for coming out in the U.S. is 15 years old.

Obviously, that’s a tremendous shift, and it is part of what makes *Rainbow Boys* so relevant. A book like it provides a vicarious emotional experience that can be tremendously valuable in helping teens navigate the transition to psychologically mature, healthy, integrated adults.

Equally relevant is how a book like *Rainbow Boys* can help non-gay readers understand and empathize with gay teens. I think the book’s selection as a Best Book for Young Adults by the Young Adult Library Services Association further reflects our culture’s changing attitudes.

TE: Where did the story grow from? What was the impetus for writing a novel that is essentially about teenagers?

AS: I think the story of *Rainbow Boys* grew out of my own internal struggle between wanting to accept myself and being afraid to. I recall Faulkner talked about writing in terms of the heart in conflict with itself. In my case, I think that internal conflict took the form of teen characters because our teenage years present such a defining time in our lives. We’re no longer children and not yet adults. It’s the period when we’re often struggling hardest to define who we are.

TE: Did you know as you were writing that you were working on a novel that would appeal to a YA audience? If so, how did that intention guide you?

AS: I didn't write *Rainbow Boys* with a particular audience in mind. As the novel took shape, however, it became apparent I was writing the book I desperately wanted and needed to read when I was a teenager, one that would have told me: "You don't have to hate yourself for being gay. It's okay to be who you are." My intention was to write an upbeat and affirming book that would inspire and encourage empathy.

TE: How did you do the research about Gay Straight Alliances in schools and what did you find out that may have surprised you about GSAs?

AS: My knowledge of GSAs came primarily from my involvement with the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). What has surprised me is how many straight students actively participate in GSAs. True to the name, they really are gay-straight alliances.

TE: Have you encountered controversies about the book? What have the reactions been like when you've visited schools, for example?

AS: Not much controversy yet. The book has received an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response. I think that's because educators are on the front lines of cultural change among youth. Several teachers and librarians have told me they know exactly who could benefit from reading *Rainbow Boys*. Librarians see how gay kids hide in the library to avoid harassment. That's what I did. Unfortunately, there weren't any books like *Rainbow Boys* when I was growing up.

Educators in general have become more aware of how gay kids are persecuted. They've become more knowledgeable about the disproportionately higher rates among gay and lesbian teens of alcoholism, drug abuse, smoking, absenteeism, truancy, HIV-infection, STDs, depression, suicide—just about any self-destructive and at-risk behavior you can name.

It's been exciting for me to discover how many educators now realize the harmful consequences of homophobia on self-esteem. They recognize the need to understand, protect, and accept gay youth. More and more parents, teachers, and administrators are seeing that if we want safe schools, those schools have to be safe for everyone. That includes gay youth.

TE: Authors sometimes talk about how the characters in their writing "take over" so that they begin to tell the story to the writer. Does that make sense to you? How did your characters come to life in your head and on the page?

AS: Oh, yeah, perfect sense. At first, I strive to breathe life into a character by giving him or her qualities I can iden-

tify with. That makes the character real to me and hopefully to others. During the writing of the story, at each interaction I ask myself three questions: What are the characters thinking? What are they feeling? How do they show it?

As those thoughts, feelings, and actions begin to define characters, they begin to come to life. It's exhilarating and exasperating. The characters start saying and doing things I hadn't foreseen. Writing can sorely test an author's control issues.

TE: I think readers are often interested in knowing how much of a story is autobiographical. How would you respond to that question?

AS: Though the story is mostly fiction, it definitely captures threads from my life. Each of the three central characters portrays some aspect of myself, whether it's Jason's struggle with self-acceptance, Kyle's dreamy romanticism, or Nelson's longing to find love. Although none of the characters is fully me, many of the situations they encounter sprang from kernels of my own experience, but play out in scenarios very different from mine.

TE: What were your experiences in school, as a boy questioning your sexual identity (that's assuming you were, of course)?

AS: I was 13 when I first heard the word "gay". Immediately, I knew that's what I was. And I hated myself for it. Like so many gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (glbtq) teens, for the remainder of my school years I withdrew, depressed. After school, alone in my room, I would tell myself, "I'm not going to feel this way. I refuse to let this happen." The worst part was there was no one I could talk to about it.

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I remember during one English class we read Shirley Jackson's story, "The Lottery," in which a village has a lottery each year to decide who in the community will be stoned. Afterwards, the teacher discussed scapegoats, in terms of the persecution of witches in Salem and of the Jews in the Holocaust, but said nothing of the students being made scapegoats, taunted, and terrorized in our school every day—the gay kids.

In order to get through high school, I became quiet, invisible, trying to avoid calling attention to myself. I felt so alone.

TE: How might your high school teachers have described you as a student?

AS: I was the best little boy in the world, just as in An-

drew Tobias's book of that title—a classic overachiever, trying to mask the shame I felt at being gay.

TE: How did you get started writing? When did that happen?

AS: All through school I loved to write reports and compositions, but never anything that would reveal the feelings going on inside me. I was terrified of anyone seeing what I wrote and finding out I was gay.

In college I took a children's literature class and for a project, I wrote a children's book. After college I continued to write, but I was still too afraid to write anything truly personal. Once I took a creative writing workshop and wrote a story with a gay character. But the instructor's homophobia caused him to lash out at it and reinforced my belief that writing about my feelings was too shameful. After that I didn't write for several years.

TE: I know you are working on a sequel to the book. How are you approaching that? Will the new book pick up with the same story line or will it take place at a different time in the same characters' lives? What's it been like to go back to these boys?

AS: After living with these characters for eight years, I was eager to move on. But during the publication process of *Rainbow Boys*, I'd learned to trust the judgment of my editor, Kevin Lewis. When he proposed the sequel, it took me a minute to catch my breath. But now that I've begun, it's fun watching the boys grow and mature.

The sequel takes place during the second half of senior year, as the boys face new and different challenges. The dramatic storylines explore more deeply issues about HIV, safer sex, and teen relationships told through characters that readers can care about and learn from.

TE: What advice have you been given about writing that you'd pass along to young writers?

AS: When you write, appeal to as many of the reader's senses as possible—visual images, sounds, tastes, smells, tex-

tures. Use dialogue sparingly. Actions really do speak louder than words. And above all, surround yourself with people who will give you confidence and build you up as a writer. Encouragement is so important.

TE: How has writing this book changed you? What have you learned from the "rainbow boys" that you won't forget?

AS: The book has put me at the forefront of issues regarding diversity, acceptance, homophobia, personal integrity, and gay youth. I'm enormously encouraged by my visits to schools. Teens are so much more open and accepting. I feel immense joy each time I receive an email from a reader who has found hope and courage as a result of the book. The book's tremendously favorable reception has been extremely healing for me.

One thing I've learned is how starved our society is for inspiration, for role models. Something in us longs to admire, marvel at, and be reminded that the human spirit is amazing, enduring, powerful and good. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the need is even more striking.

During the writing of *Rainbow Boys*, I was inspired by the courageous stories of gay teens coming out and challenging homophobia across the country. Those role models fed the characters of Jason, Kyle, and Nelson. Now those characters are empowering readers. It's a cycle of inspiration I hope I'll never forget.

Toby Emert is currently completing a Ph.D. in English Education at the University of Virginia. He has worked as a theater and language arts teacher in middle and high schools and as a university instructor at the University of Tennessee, The University of Texas at Austin, Longwood College, and the University of Virginia.