



Crossing Two Bridges:

Coming Out, the Power of Images in YA Lit
Remarks adapted from panel discussion at the 2003 NCTE Convention

When I was growing up I had no images of people like me. You see, I am an immigrant, born in Mexico. When I was five, my family immigrated to Texas.

As I now speak to groups, I've found that many Americans don't know that up until the 1950s, in Texas and much of the Southwest, all people of color, including Mexican-American people, suffered the same segregation we typically identify with African-American people. People like me were required to have separate schools, use separate eating places, water fountains, and restrooms.

When I arrived in Texas at five years old in the early 1960's, desegregation of Mexicans had only recently taken place. For the first time in my life I experienced prejudice and playground cruelty.

When I started school I did not know a word of English. Other children picked on me for being different, for not speaking English. I experienced being an outsider.

I was fortunate, however, in that my teachers never made me feel inadequate or inferior because of my inability to speak English. Although my teachers didn't know Spanish, we somehow managed to communicate.

Although I lacked self-confidence, it was thanks to teachers like you, who recognized my efforts at learning, that I made progress. By fourth grade I was in the advanced level reading group.

Ms. Holden, my third-grade teacher was also highly influential. From her I learned to appreciate literature and the art of storytelling. She regularly asked us to write—and even though I had difficulty

expressing myself, I enjoyed writing.

She also read to us once a week from *The Secret Garden*. I learned from the eager anticipation with which I awaited each reading the power and value of writing to captivate and engage the imagination.

I worked hard to learn English as fast as I could. And yet I soon discovered this wasn't enough. I was still looked down upon because I was Mexican.

I wanted to fit in. I wanted to belong. I wanted to be liked and accepted.

In order to do so, I stopped speaking Spanish. When my parents took me shopping or to a restaurant, I would tell them to speak only English. I didn't want other people to know we were from Mexico.

Because of my light-skinned father and his German last name (not Sanchez), I learned I could pass as white. I could hide who I was, so that others would like and accept me.

By the time I reached middle school, I had buried a core part of myself—my Mexican heritage—deep inside me. I was no longer different.

Or so I thought.

Then came the biggest challenge of my life.

I was 13 (in eighth grade) when I first heard the word "gay." Immediately, I knew that's what I was.

Sometimes, people who aren't gay will ask me, "But how could you know you were gay at such a young age?"

Well, the development process for gay kids really isn't much different than for other kids. As we hit puberty, around the age of 13, we start becoming aware of our sexual attractions.

I suspect most boys that age, when they see a kissing scene in a movie, they identify with the guy kissing the girl. In my case, I clearly remember wishing the guy were kissing me.

While the other boys claimed crushes on girls—I carried my own secret crushes on some of those very same boys.

Believe me, I knew I was gay—as surely as many of you first knew you were straight. And I hated myself for it. Why?

Because growing up gay or lesbian also means growing up surrounded by homophobia. At 13 years old, I believed that being gay was the worst thing in the world a boy could be.

After school, alone in my room, I would tell myself, *I'm not going to feel this way. I refuse to let this happen.*

I wished desperately there was some one I could talk to. I'd been able to talk to my parents and brother about kids laughing at me for not speaking English, or being Mexican. After all, they were in the same position I was—in a different culture, learning a different language. But how could I talk to my parents and brother about the confused feelings I was having about being gay? I knew they weren't gay.

Nor could I talk to my schoolmates about it. They all made jokes about gay people—or worse.

I remember one boy at school, who was labeled “queer” and who consequently got beat up every day. I watched and stood silent, wishing I had the courage to say something—but too afraid that if I said anything, people might suspect I was gay too.

Instead, I looked on, feeling ashamed and guilty for standing by and not doing anything. I felt totally alone.

So, just as I had learned to hide that I was Mexican, I tried to hide that I was gay. I became depressed, quiet, invisible, trying to escape calling attention to myself.

At lunch I sat alone. But then I felt such self-hatred sitting by myself, that I skipped lunch altogether. Instead, I hid out in the library.

Now, I estimate our school library had several thousand books. How many of those books told me it was okay to have the feelings I experienced? That I wasn't sick for wanting to love and be loved by another boy like me?

None.

How many of those books described how homophobia hurt kids like me?

Not a single one.

I came to hate school. What teen wouldn't hate an atmosphere that leads a boy or girl to hate himself or herself?

The way I coped was by burying myself in my schoolwork. I studied hard, became a classic over-achiever, raced through school, and graduated a year and a half ahead of schedule.

I went on to college, and eventually became a youth and family counselor, working to help discriminated populations—of Latino, black, and Asian youth—street kids, delinquents, troubled families. And at night, alone, I would try to write.

Writing was a way of healing. I began writing about high school, about being different, and about the struggle to live by values in a world of injustice and hate. I wrote to be heard. I wrote to be accepted. I wrote to find my voice.

Finally, my novel, *Rainbow Boys*, about teens fighting homophobia—was published—eight years after I'd started it.

In the months prior to publication, I was a total nervous wreck. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I was terrified what people would say.

Then my editor phoned with the first review.

It came from the *School Library Journal*—which recommends to librarians whether they should buy certain books for their schools—the books that my school library did not carry.

A librarian in Springfield, Missouri, wrote: “There will no doubt be challenges to *Rainbow Boys*, much like the challenges of Judy Blume's *Forever* when it was published in the 1970s. But please, have the courage to make it available to those who will need it—it can open eyes and change lives.”

Wow! My book? Change lives?

As I read the reviews, I realized that I had written the book I desperately wanted and needed to read when I was a teen.

A book that would've told me: It's okay to be who you are.

And apparently, that's the impact it's having on young people.

I'd like to read to you a few of the many email letters I've received from teens about the book.

The first is from a girl:

Dear Mr. Sanchez,

I live in a really homophobic town and it was refreshing to read about characters dealing with that in high school, especially when things like that are happening to me in jr. high. Sex hardly ever gets addressed, especially homosexual issues, and yet we deal with homophobia every day. It was nice to know we're not alone.

I've been slowly coming out as being bisexual but lately it's been really hard and the only people who know are my closest friends, and even then some of my friends I find myself lying to for fear they would ditch me.

Your book inspired me a lot, and maybe someday I'll feel confident enough to completely come out. Anyway, I gotta go. Just wanted to tell you your book rocked.

This one's from a boy:

Dear Mr. Sanchez,

I am 16, and gay, and I had the almost exact same situation in my life as Kyle did, except it didn't end quite as well.

In the chapter when Kyle told his Mom, it was like I was reliving telling my Mom again. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do . . . as I imagine it is for many.

I have also experienced homophobia a lot in my life, most from my father and brother, like Jason has. Almost every day I have to deal with persecution and harassment. It makes me feel a lot better about who I am knowing that there are people like you out there trying to spread understanding and acceptance.

Another email, from a 17-year-old boy:

Hey Alex,

I hate to read but I went through your book in about 3 days. I wanted to cry after every sentence and every identification that I saw between the book and myself.

It makes me wonder why I and so many other gay teens have to worry about this. I feel that I do especially have to worry about what people are going to say, simply because of the status I have, being the wrestling captain, and good at other sports in school. I often ask myself, Is being gay worth the rep it has? What would coming out do to the rep I have now in school?

I guess I'm just very confused, I'm just not sure I guess. But when I read your book, I was sure. I am gay. But I don't know how to handle it.

Well, that's all I really have to say. Your book has changed the way I look upon things. And I thank you for that.

This email is from a girl:

I'm not homosexual, but I always had interest in how people who were felt. I, being [from a fundamentalist family],

couldn't ask for answers in certain places, and so I just wondered. . . . thank you for writing your book, because although I got a lot out of it, I'm sure others will find many more answers than I have, and feel like they're not so alone anymore.

And this one:

Mr. Sanchez

I just recently found out about your book through my ex-boyfriend. You see, we recently broke up after a long relationship. After our break-up he started reading your book. He told a mutual friend that "Rainbow Boys" really spoke to him. He says he now knows for sure about his sexuality.

I never realized that the guy I had fallen in love with was gay. This came to me as a shock. But I know that I must be bigger than the initial shock. I love him and want him to be happy, no matter who he is with. . . .

[But] I'm afraid this journey will get the best of him.

Thank you for helping me to understand what he's going through so that way I can help him.

And this one:

Hi, I'm Meghan. I'm sixteen, and I'm bisexual. I came out last year. I told my close friends and my family. It was hard. My friends told their friends and it kept going. Within a week I was getting strange looks.

This year is hard. No one wants to be in my gym class, some girls transferred out, one told the principal I was looking at her when she changed and I might be charged for harassment. I've had one girlfriend. She broke up with me, told me I do more harm than help. My family (outside my parents) won't talk to me.

Even my sister throws Bible quotes at me about being 'unnatural.' I lost all of my friends, now I'm just floating around between groups of 'Goths.'

Oh, look. I was going on about my problems and I didn't get to tell you how much we loved your book. After I read it, I had my principal read it. He wants the library to get some copies. He wants to make the book available to all teenagers.

So far those who have read RAINBOW BOYS are touched by what really goes on in my life and the lives of those around me. With more people aware, maybe it will get better. He thinks that if we get enough people to read it then a GSA will start on its own and we won't have to fight so hard.

This one from a teacher:

Alex,

Thanks so much for writing Rainbow Boys. I'm a high school teacher . . . Somehow your book, which I hadn't heard of, was on my bookshelf when I got to school in September. I

didn't pay it any attention until a new student joined our school.

Quan is out and proud. He also could barely read . . . He has lots of learning disabilities and had dropped out (our school is for drop outs). Thank God he found my classroom and thank God I had your book. I gave it to him and he read it carefully, page by page—calling me over often to read aloud to him and help him make sense of the book. He immediately identified with Nelson and said he liked him the best of the three boys. He couldn't believe someone had written down his experience. Quan turned in the book Friday, after keeping it about 2 months.

Thanks again.

This one from a boy:

I remembered having read [Rainbow Boys] in like, the 9th grade. Then I went to Boys Town, a facility for behavioral problems.

While there I was very confused about who I was. Being at that place, they forbade anything related to homosexuality. I remembered what a well-written book you had and managed to sneak it in after a trip to the library (believe me, it was not easy, that book is big in shape).

After rereading that book, I found the courage to be able to accept myself as gay. Reading about Kyle, I found the courage to tell a couple of my friends that I was gay. They were completely supportive of me.

Well, I originally was going to write this message to you just to tell you how great the book was. Keep up the great work.

And this one:

Hey I read your book and . . . I didn't want it to end! Jason and Kyle became so true to me!

I'm a struggling 14 yr old gay teenager who has parents that are trying to make me straight.

They took me out of school and won't let me talk to my old friends.

So far my life seems like it would make a good depressing book!

I don't know how long I will be alone but I will have to buy Rainbow High when it comes out! Will it have Jason and Kyle in it?

I feel so much like Kyle and now I'm in love with Jason, too bad he's fiction!

I'll write you again soon!

Write back!

And this one:

Dear Mr. Sanchez:

Hi my name is Tommy . . . I am in 8th grade and I was at the library looking for books on coming out when I found Rainbow Boys. I read it hoping it would help me and it did, not only did it help me come out to my friends it helped me to come out to my family . . . will you make a sequel? . . . Please e-mail me back ASAP. Thank you.

To which I responded, yes there will be a sequel—but tell me what happened when you came out to your family?

To which he replied:

Dear Mr. Sanchez:

Thank you for e-mailing me back. When I came out to my parents it was hard but a relief. I told my mom I was reading your book and she said she knew what it was about and she had guessed I was gay. Then she told me I should tell my dad.

I really did not want to tell him because he'd never really approved of me in the first place. He'd always said that I should not try to be different, which I wasn't trying to—I just am.

So I finally told him. He did not really talk to me—but after a week he told me that he was having a lot of trouble at work and to come home and find out I was gay. He told me he was just in shock.

I was wondering if you had a title for the new book? If so could you please tell me so I know what to look for when it comes out. Thank you.

Reading these letters, I think back to the boy I watched get beaten when I was in high school—and how I didn't have the courage to stand up for him then.

Sometimes we get second chances in life. I'm speaking up for him now—and for thousands of other boys and girls like him.

I have found my voice.

My success in writing came only when I was finally able to accept myself, when I stopped believing that who I am was shameful, less than, not good enough. Only when I ceased being silent did my writing acquire a voice.

And I have discovered a function for my writing I never imagined. In school I'd been taught to read and write in terms of commas and metaphors. I was never taught to think of writing and books as agents of social change, able to inspire, empower, and change lives.

For years I worked as a counselor, trying to help teens and families, while in private, I kept a personal journal of my thoughts and experiences.

But the public and private sides of my life never merged. The half that wanted to roll up my sleeves and do something to help the kids on the street and the half that wanted to retreat behind the door of my apartment to write were at odds.

I never imagined those two halves could meet—that my writing could help anyone other than me.

Since *Rainbow Boys* was published, those two parts of my life have finally joined. I know this because of the emails I read to you and hundreds of others like them.

I have come to accept myself as a writer who not only tells stories, but who does so in a way that helps create change in the world by promoting social justice.

That my books do this ceaselessly amazes me.

Through my writing I hope to give readers an insight into the lives of gay and lesbian teenagers, their families, their friends, and communities—the daily name-calling and bullying they experience, their courage, struggles, hopes and dreams for a better life for both themselves and for those you come after them.

My mom taught me that each of us should help make the world better.

As I have spoken to teachers and librarians around the country, what I have come to understand is this: As each of you incorporate texts about growing up gay in your own schools and libraries, you will be confronted with your own coming out process. As you are perhaps challenged by the prejudices of a parent or administrator and put in a position to defend such books, you will experience a little bit of what it is like to grow up gay or lesbian, constantly being challenged about who we are.

But if we don't accept that social responsibility, then who will?

I love the line from the movie *Spiderman*: "With great power comes great responsibility."

Each of us as writers and as teachers has that power and that responsibility. You too can change lives.

Thank you.

Alex Sanchez is the author of Rainbow Boys and Rainbow High.