

To Be Young, Gifted, Black, and Lesbian: Wyeth and Woodson, Models for Saving a Life

“I wish to live because life has within it that which is good, that which is beautiful, and that which is love.”
—Lorraine Hansberry (1969, p. xvii)

“The absence of models, in literature as in life, to say nothing of painting, is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one’s view of existence.”

—Alice Walker (1983, p. 4)

On a warm spring day last April, just a few blocks away from my home near Decatur, Georgia, an eleven-year-old boy got home from school, greeted and high-fived his mother with a glowing report card, went to his room, and hung himself in his closet with his own belt. Tormented by classmates who called him “gay” and bullied him daily, this young boy chose to end his life rather than continue fighting the abuse. No one will ever know whether this young man was gay or not, nor does that fact really matter. What does matter is that his being called “gay” by the bullies of his school was enough to make him lose all hope in life—to blind him to “that which is good, that which is beautiful, and that which is love” (Hansberry, 1969, p. xvii).

While Hansberry may not have been writing to address issues of homosexuality, there can be no denying that gay and lesbian teens often face oppression and despair and need us to point them toward “that which is good,” to give them strength and some hope of acceptance. With the suicide of Rutgers’s student Tyler Clementi, one of at least five gay teen suicides over a three-month period, many educators and community

members question how they can make a difference—how they can save a life. Those of us who believe in the power of words need the tools that can truly lift the clouds and help young people find a place in this world. This article will introduce two phenomenal books that should be added to the toolbox: Sharon Dennis Wyeth’s *Orpheus Proud* (2004) and Jacqueline Woodson’s *The House You Pass on the Way* (2003). But before we can understand *how* to use the tools, we need to understand the *why*—Why are these books and others like them needed in our classrooms? Why do English teachers need to take on this role of saving a life?

In her essay, “Saving the Life That Is Your Own,” Alice Walker (1983) attempts to answer a very similar question, quoting from a letter written by Vincent Van Gogh about a year after he cut off his ear and six months before he committed suicide. Van Gogh writes, “‘Society makes our existence wretchedly difficult at times, hence our impotence and the imperfection of our work. . . . I myself am suffering under an absolute lack of models’” (p. 4). According to Walker, “The absence of models, in literature as in life, to say

nothing of painting, is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one’s view of existence” (p. 4). This growing of spirit and intellect, this enriching and enlarging the view of existence—that is the complex role of the English teacher.

Another Georgia writer, Carson McCullers (1984), speaking through the words of Berenice Sadie Brown in *The Member of the Wedding*, says, “We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don’t know why. But we caught anyhow” (p. 113). And although Berenice’s words may indeed be true, those of us who teach and love literature must surely believe that through books, we find a way to be less “caught,” less alone in life, that we do indeed find models in the pages of books. If we, as English teachers, believe that one of literature’s highest ideals is providing readers with a sense of self—a sense of place in a complex world—and that this is certainly one of the primary purposes for young adult literature, then we must also realize that there are many pockets of diversity, even within literature of diversity, that are often overlooked.

Finding Diversity in Diversity: African American Lesbian Adolescent Literature

One example of the “often overlooked” pockets of diversity would be the young African American lesbian, who must search a bit harder and with a more creative mind than other young adults who find themselves in literature. Another is questioning teen girls, who will have to search harder than questioning teen boys. And rural or southern teens will find fewer stories that reflect their lives than those from urban areas. Finding themselves through the pages of young adult literature and feeling less “caught” could be a challenge for these marginalized groups—even in today’s more tolerant world.

A quick review of the list of Lambda (an organization that celebrates and promotes LGBT literature) award winners and nominees since 2000 reveals some surprising facts. With over 25 books nominated in the children’s/young adult category for 2008 and more in 2009, we can celebrate the fact that more and more titles are being published, but we must also notice the gaps in this growing field. Although the list of winners

since 2000 contains approximately 17 male protagonists to 11 female characters, there are far more Caucasian characters than any other racial group, and while Lambda, the American Library Association, and countless publishers and authors should certainly be praised for their tremendous work in expanding this field, it does appear that even in our efforts toward diversity, we may find that the stories are not very diverse. In fact, of the 40 books honored by Lambda since 2000, only one book centers on the life of an African American female. A young African American lesbian may indeed have great difficulty finding herself in the pages of young adult fiction. The Newbery list includes several honor books by Jacqueline Woodson, an openly lesbian writer of young adult fiction, but only one of those books contains a gay African American male, and even he is not the protagonist of the story. (For a list of recommended books, see the sidebar on p. 30.)

Middle and high school teachers may still fear the repercussions from teaching literature with homosexual content, but we know that our classrooms contain many teens who are questioning their sexual identities. Teens growing up in rural or isolated areas are no less confused than the teens of California or New York City, and yet these adolescents must often try to find their way with very few community resources and frequently in complete isolation from a gay community. These young people are not only struggling with the normal angst of adolescence and coming of age, they are also tormented by their own confusing thoughts and desires, usually with very little support from their own homes and schools. And although some community members and school administrators will question our motives for bringing gay literature into the classroom, statistics show that these young people often consider suicide as their solution to feeling “caught.”

Homosexual teens are often shunned, teased, and harassed by their classmates if they are open about their sexuality, often causing these students to hide their true feelings and remain closeted. So, while all teens may face some issues of isolation and feelings

There are many pockets of diversity, even within literature of diversity, that are often overlooked.

Other Recommended Young Adult LGBTQ Texts

- Benduhn, T. (2003). *Gravel queen*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Boock, P. (1997). *Dare truth or promise*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Garden, N. (1982). *Annie on my mind*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Garden, N. (1996). *Good moon rising*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Howe, J. (2001). *The misfits*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.
- Howe, J. (2003). *The misfits*. Audio CD. Syracuse: Full Cast Audio.
- Howe, J. (2005). *Totally Joe*. New York: Ginee Seo Books.
- Kerr, M. E. (1994). *Deliver us from Evie*. New York: Harper Trophy.
- Levithan, D. (2003). *Boy meets boy*. New York: Knopf.
- MacLean, J. (2004). *Rosemary and Juliet*. New York: Alice Street Editions.
- Miller, I. (1969). *Patience and Sarah*. New York: Fawcett Crest.
- Myracle, L. (2003). *Kissing Kate*. New York: Penguin.
- Peters, J. (2003). *Keeping you a secret*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Peters, J. (2004). *Luna*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Peters, J. (2005). *Far from Xanadu*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Reynolds, M. (2001). *Love rules*. Buena Park: Morning Glory Press.
- Ryan, S. (2001). *Empress of the world*. New York: Penguin.
- Shimko, B. (2002). *Letters in the attic*. Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers.
- Watts, J. (2001). *Finding H. F.* Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- Wittlinger, E. (1999). *Hard love*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

of nonconformity due to height, weight, race, socio-economic background, disabilities, religion, and a host of other issues that make them feel “caught,” homosexual and questioning teens may hide their deepest feelings even from their closest friends and family members. Teachers and librarians may be the only lifeline for queer and questioning teens in an intolerant world, so this article will offer a few threads of hope to guide educators in braiding stronger lines of help for today’s adolescents. (See the sidebar on p. 31 for additional valuable resources.)

Since teachers, librarians, parents, and the young people they love may need a bit of guidance in finding books that echo the lives of these questioning teens, this article will include lessons and teaching tools to help enlighten today’s classrooms and libraries. Many teachers may be much more fearful of taking literature with homosexual content into the classroom than they are of other contemporary controversial topics, such as rape or incest.

Judith Hayn and Lisa Hazlett (2008) provide a wonderful recommendation list in their 2008 article, “Connecting LGBTQ to Others through Problem Novels: When a LGBTQ is NOT the Main Character,” but in school systems that have banned books such as the Harry Potter series, teachers are reluctant to bring in novels that they fear will stir up more trouble. With those teachers and schools in mind, along with their questioning students, this study centers on *Orphea Proud*, the 2004 young adult novel by Sharon Dennis Wyeth and lone African American winner of the Lambda Honor award, and *The House You Pass on the Way*, Jacqueline Woodson’s 1997 novel and winner of the Coretta Scott King Award. Both books follow the experiences of young strong African American female protagonists who question their sexual identities and struggle with feeling “caught.” Both books are also set in rural areas and reveal a strong connection to family and heritage while celebrating the power of arts and creative expression.

Growing Up Proud: Wyeth’s Model for Saving a Life

Why This Book?

Orphea Proud’s life and story begin with death—the death of her friend and lover, the death of her minister father, the death of her kind-hearted, loving mother,

as well as Orphea’s own attempted suicide—and even with all of these deaths in the first few chapters, Wyeth’s novel is still an upbeat story. The pain that Orphea suffers over her lover’s death—unfortunately a very common plotline in lesbian love stories—is worsened by her stepbrother and guardian Rupert’s cruelty in reaction to her newfound sexual identity. When Orphea is beaten by Rupert on the same day that Lissa is killed in a car crash, she reaches an all-time low and swallows pills. All of these struggles—from the rejection and beating by a family member to the attempted suicide to Orphea’s complete confusion about her own sexuality—echo the lives of many queer and questioning teens. When she is eventually kicked out of the house to live with her aunts in Virginia, her story also mirrors the rejection of countless homosexual adolescents.

In Virginia, we meet Orphea’s eccentric aunts whose first words to her are, “Welcome home. You must be hungry” (p. 79). We also meet her distant white cousin and a variety of other folks who give the story a very southern feel and who also give Orphea the healing that she so desperately needs and deserves. Even though Rupert forbade her to tell her secret to her aunts, she still finds solace in their company.

Proud Road is another country. You’d probably think it’s the middle of nowhere or even the end of the world. I think of it as the land of softness in honor of the quilts and pillows my two aunts gave me to take up to a loft, where I slept for a week. (p. 79)

As Orphea wakes in her mother’s bed surrounded by the quilts of her family, she slowly finds the comfort, love, and acceptance that she needs in order to begin loving herself. And after staying with the aunts for months and learning her heritage in her mother’s home, Orphea slowly tells her story, first to her cousin and later to Aunt Cleo and Aunt Minerva. Their reaction, “You’re family, honey child. The fact that you’re gay, as you call it, doesn’t take away from that” (p. 160). We can only hope that all real life teens get the same reaction when they come out to family and friends.

Another wonderful strength of Wyeth’s book is its connection to the arts, with tremendous variety of artistic expressions—from singing and quilting to painting and writing—with each character demonstrating a new art form. Alice Walker’s landmark essay,

“In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1983), presents African American women as the ancestors of creative spirit and courage who inspire strength and energy in the art of writing. Wyeth’s book echoes that sentiment as Orphea discovers her own artistic strength through the creative energies of her aunts.

With the entire book structured as a stage performance, we hear Orphea’s story through a series of monologues and poems, a celebration of the spoken word. Orphea remembers her mother, in love with music and the power of lifting her voice, sneaking in visits with a singing coach while she is supposed to be buying groceries. Lissa, Orphea’s friend and lover, is a

Additional Resources

- Bauer, M. D. (Ed.). (1994). *Am I blue? Coming out from the silence*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Cart, M., & Jenkins, C. A. (2006). *The heart has its reasons: Young adult literature with gay/lesbian/queer content, 1969–2004*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Day, F. A. (2000). *Lesbian and gay voices: An annotated bibliography and guide to literature for children and young adults*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Howey, N., & Samuels, E. (Eds.). (2000). *Out of the ordinary: Essays on growing up with gay, lesbian, and transgender parents*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffon.
- Levithan, D., & Merrell, B. (Eds.). (2006). *The full spectrum: A new generation of writing about gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and other identities*. New York: Knopf.
- Rich, A. (1986). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Blood, bread, and poetry: Selected prose 1979–1985* (pp. 23–75). New York: Norton.
- Richardson, J., & Parnell, P. (2005). *And Tango makes three*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Sonnie, A. (Ed.). (2000). *Revolutionary voices: A multicultural queer youth anthology*. New York: Alyson Books.

talented artist, as is Ray, Orphea's cousin, who paints loving life-sized images of the horse who injured him long ago. And Aunt Cleo's story quilt not only retells the family history, it also transforms the scraps of her loved ones' belongings into a work of art. So each of the characters that help Orphea on her journey possesses skills in a different art form. Like Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, the book illustrates the power of artistic expression in transforming lives

Like Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, the book illustrates the power of artistic expression in transforming lives and finding inner strength.

and finding inner strength. Oddly enough, because of this connection to the arts and heritage, one of the strengths of the novel is that it is more than a lesbian love story. Homosexuality is part of the story, but it is not *the* story. What follows are suggestions for teaching this novel, but even if teachers are reluctant to incorporate the book in their curriculum units, educators should include the novel in library book orders and on classroom bookshelves. We need more diversity in our diversity collections, and this is a great start to that process. These teaching suggestions focus on ideas for artistic expression, but this is a book that could be taught in conjunction with a variety of other disciplines from speech and drama to mathematics, geography, and history. The ideas listed here allow for differentiated instruction and student choice in all projects. Students could certainly help to generate the list of activities during the reading of the novel, allowing for student ownership in the learning process and for the option to create projects that tap into their individual learning styles.

Teaching Suggestions

Quilt squares are a great way to begin the unit, build community, and study one of America's oldest art forms. In this project, each student creates a quilt square—using construction paper if sewing is too time-consuming—representing his or her own identity. Students in my classes have included sports images, hobbies, pets, family, and even food on their quilt squares. A quick slide show illustrating some of the intricate patterns used by quilt makers, such as those

included on the Crossroads of the Heart website for the Mississippi Quilting group (Mississippi Arts Commission, 1999) or the Virginia Quilt Museum (2008) is a nice way to introduce some of the history and pattern names that might add more creativity to student choices. (All websites mentioned in this article can be found in the sidebar on p. 33.) The squares could be assembled into a classroom quilt as a way to bring the community together and illustrate the power of individuality and creative expression.

Quilting projects are also a great way to bring mathematics into the English classroom, as many quilt patterns require precise measurement and even geometry skills. As to other literature that would be useful in discussing quilts and their symbolism, many Faith Ringgold books, including *Tar Beach* (Ringgold, 1991), provide wonderful visuals and an illustration of how story quilts work. Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" (Walker, 2003), a short story that explores family heritage and loyalties through representations of two very different sisters and the fight for a mother's quilt and affection, also provides a nice contrast to *Orphea Proud*. While Orphea finds comfort and an understanding of her own identity through her return to Proud Road, Walker's Dee Wangero remains completely lost in her own search for self and heritage. So, beginning with a quilting exercise can do much more than tap into visual and tactile learning styles and other content areas. The activity can also introduce countless literary skills from symbolism to theme to conflict; more important, quilting provides a metaphor for the artistic process that Orphea must explore.

This is also a book that could easily kick off an oral history project where students collect their own family stories. In teaching this process to my students, I have required them to interview their oldest living relative. In the case of students who cannot find a willing family member or who may simply not be connected to their own families, I collect names from the local Council on Aging group. An interview with some of the oldest community members can be just as revealing as talking with a family member. Churches are also a good resource for collecting names of willing interviewees. I require students to develop interview questions, but I also emphasize the importance of knowing when to ask follow-up questions. And when interviewees are open to allowing the interview to be video- or audio-taped, the recordings become valuable

to the entire family. The final product can be a short essay, a slide show, or even a YouTube video that is presented to the class or community. As Orpheia pieces together her family heritage through the stories she gathers, so can our students collect their own sense of identity. What a valuable lesson that can be.

Involving the speech or drama teacher in the book project would allow the class to create a stage performance of monologues or even a poetry slam. A wonderful pattern for this process can be found in *With Their Eyes: September 11—A View from a High School at Ground Zero*, a book edited by Annie Thoms, who guided her students through interviews following the events of September 11 and helped them create monologues for the stage. Each family or community interview could become a monologue, or students could write their own creative poems for a performance poetry night with Orpheia's poems as a model.

For students who enjoy creating drawings or paintings, this book might serve as inspiration for artists to create a mural of the community represented in the interviews or monologues, much as Orpheia's cousin Ray did. A nice literary connection to this idea of a community mural can be found in Toni Cade Bambara's "The War of the Wall" (2007), the story of a stranger who appears one day in a small town and begins painting a mural on a wall. Though some of the town's young people lay claim to that wall and initially reject the outsider artist, they eventually learn about themselves and their community's heritage through the painter's artwork. The young people in Bambara's story, like Orpheia, discover complexities about their own identities through the eyes and art of others.

Orpheia Proud is a book that inspires artistic expression, a book that speaks to all teens struggling with identity—sexual, racial, or just average teenage angst. Orpheia's strength and creative spirit may be the lifeline that a troubled teen needs, but her story—her quilt square—cannot become a part of the rich tapestry or quilt without the insight of open-minded educators. According to Alice Walker, we need to gain an understanding of the larger perspective if we are to become happy and healthy in this world.

What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity, a fearlessness of growth, of search, of looking, that enlarges the private and the public world. And yet, in our particular society, it is the narrowed and narrowing view of life that often wins. (p. 5)

Choosing this book for classroom instruction will seem like a political act to some educators. To others, it may stray too far from the curriculum's focus on classic literature. To our students, however, books like *Orpheia Proud* may be as comforting as the quilts of Aunt Cleo, speaking to them like Orpheia's aunts, "Welcome home."

Passing in a White Straight World: Jacqueline Woodson's Model for Saving a Life

Like *Orpheia Proud*, Jacqueline Woodson's *The House You Pass on the Way* centers on the struggles of a young African American girl questioning her sexual identity. Unlike Orpheia, however, Staggerlee also struggles with issues of racial identity, as she is the daughter of an African American father and Caucasian mother. She sees her mother as a woman with

Web Resources

American Library Association Stonewall Book Awards
<http://www.ala.org/ala/glbtrt/stonewall/stonewallbook.htm>

Crossroads of the Heart (Mississippi Quilting)
<http://www.arts.state.ms.us/crossroads/quilting.htm>

It Gets Better
<http://www.itgetsbetter.org>

Lambda Literary Awards
<http://www.lambdaliterary.org/>

Michael L. Printz Awards
<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/printzaward/Printz.htm>

San Francisco Public Library
<http://sfpl.lib.ca.us/>

Virginia Quilt Museum
<http://www.vaquiltmuseum.org/>

no friends, unable to fit into the black community and rejected by the white community. This biracial issue confuses Staggerlee, who even begins attending church so that she can find Jesus and is surprised to discover that He appears to look like her, “not black, not white, but both and all of it” (p. 8).

Staggerlee, whose real name is Evangeline Ian Canan, confides most of her problems to her dog, Creek, who is her constant companion as she re-thinks

the relationship with her friend, Trout. The rejection Staggerlee experiences from Trout and the confusion she feels because of her mixed racial background are the primary struggles for Staggerlee. When Trout arrives for her visit and remarks at Staggerlee’s light skin and how she could pass for white, Staggerlee

reacts, “Why would I want to pass? . . . I know what I am” (p. 59). She also spends much of the novel piecing together the story of her celebrity grandparents’ deaths from a 1969 bomb set off during a civil rights protest. Unlike Orphea, Staggerlee has the love and support of both parents and caring siblings throughout the story, so she never experiences the complete loss that we see in *Orphea Proud*, but she also struggles with multiple layers of identity issues in a household that is not known for sharing and talking through difficult topics.

So, while Staggerlee and Orphea suffer from very different complications, their stories also contain some important parallels. With both books set primarily in the rural countryside, the two stories show a connection to the land and nature, a connection that offers comfort to both protagonists. Staggerlee spends much of her time walking the banks of the nearby Breakabone River with her dog, Creek.

She walked slowly along the river, picking up shards of ice that had formed along the bank and gazing into them where rainbows shot through in every direction. She stopped walking and turned slowly, full face toward the river. Where would it take her? she wondered. She wished the river were time itself and could take her back to someplace before now. (p. 2)

A rural setting offers solace for Orphea, also. When

her brother kicks her out of her city home, she finds herself in a very different world—the countryside with her aunts, learning to split wood and survive the cold. Looking out at the scenery, she sees “The fields and mountains were covered with a sugar frosting of fresh snow” (p. 109)—just one of many references to snow in the story, since it was ice and snow that caused Lissa’s car accident and snowy footsteps that she observes in a picture with her mother. Images of snow and ice, symbolizing stark isolation mid nature’s beauty, fill the pages of both books.

Both stories also celebrate artistic expression, as Staggerlee is a gifted musician, taking after her professional singer–dancer grandparents. She studies the old videos of their performances on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and even names herself after one of her grandfather’s songs. Staggerlee escapes to the barn to play her harmonica and dream of “traveling around the world and finding all the people in it who loved to be alone, who loved the sound of music” (p. 74). Music is her solace, and through her art form, she eventually finds her place in the community, as she is a member of the choir by the end of the book. The music teacher invites her to join, claiming, “I remember your grandmother. . . . You have her gift of song,” a comment that reminds Staggerlee of the connection she has with her loved ones (p. 105).

Quilting also plays a part in *The House You Pass on the Way* as Trout describes her love for needlework. “I thought I was going to hate quilting at first, but it’s like . . . it’s like you take all these pieces from all these parts of your life and you sew them together and then you have your life all over again, only it’s . . . in a different form” (p. 70). In both books, each young girl needs to express herself through art in order to claim her identity and find a place in the world.

Because of Staggerlee’s search for her place in her own family and her quest for discovering her own heritage, this book would also be a great introduction to the family history project described above. An interview with the oldest relative, an art project of designing the family tree, or even a bit of genealogy research would all work well in motivating students to follow Staggerlee’s path toward family identity. The art projects suggested for *Orphea Proud* would also work well with *The House You Pass on the Way*. Quilting and knitting play a role in the plot of the story and work as a metaphor for Staggerlee’s search, but

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music is of primary importance in her self-discoveries. Students love projects in which they get to pick the soundtrack music for the screenplay of a book. They could also do a bit of research in tracking down the lyrics of the many songs mentioned throughout the story. Woodson's novel is also filled with historical references to the civil rights movement, so this is a book that calls for some cross-discipline work, with students researching bus boycotts, integration, early African American entertainers and their role in these struggles, and even the *Ed Sullivan Show*.

While these two novels have tremendous literary merit as seen in the above projects and discussion, they were also chosen here for their specific portrayal of questioning teens. Both Woodson and Wyeth handle the subject with delicacy and respect. Educators who fear that LGBTQ books contain explicit scenes that would raise issues with parents can be assured that neither of these novels has more than a kissing scene. Both novels are also free of any language issues that would cause problems, making them much "safer" to teach than many of the recent Printz Award winners. The literary merits for teaching either book are obvious, but what these novels also do is bring questioning sexuality into classroom discussion in a positive, natural light. These stories are about young girls who really do not know who they will become. Like Orphea, Trout is sent to the country for the summer because, according to Trout, her adoptive parent "does not like the person I'm growing up to be" (p. 71).

The pain of family rejection is clear in both stories, but that pain is also complicated by confusion. A conversation between Trout and Staggerlee echoes the dialogue of Orphea and Lissa. Trout, who has spent her life in the city, claims, "I see guys in Baltimore wearing these pink triangle pins and I know it's about . . . about being gay" (p. 95). But both girls are still questioning, and Staggerlee answers, "Gay . . . I don't know that's what I am, Trout" (p. 95). When Trout assures her that if she likes kissing girls that she must be gay, Staggerlee answers, "It sounds so final. I mean—we're only fourteen" (p. 95). In *Orphea Proud*, on the evening before her death, Lissa reacts violently when Orphea kisses her, "What the hell do you think you're doing? Do you think I'm some kind of queer?" she demands, and later claims, "I'm a girl. You're my friend. That's it, understand? I'm not queer" (p. 93).

But later in the same night, Lissa returns Orphea's kiss and tells her, "I can't help who I love" (p. 97).

The Saving of Lives: A Call to Action

In recent times, media coverage concerning the tragedy of the Rutgers' student and the deaths of four other gay teens has sparked a host of questions. How can we help these young people? How can we stop the bullying? How can we make a difference? The "It Gets Better Project" began in September of 2010 as a place for lesbian, gay, and transgendered individuals to see how happiness can be a reality in life (www.itgetsbetter.org). The website features appearances from many popular figures and includes a Youtube video from President Obama in which he reminds questioning teens that they are not alone. These resources can begin to make a difference to teens who struggle with both their own identity and the torment shown to them by their peers.

If we believe Alice Walker's words, that we all suffer under an "absence of models" and that art can bring a "larger perspective," or if we understand Carson McCullers's description of feeling "caught" or Lorraine Hansberry's plea for young, gifted, black writers to "write about the world as it is and as you think it ought to be," then the need for books like *Orphea Proud* and *The House You Pass on the Way* is very clear. Trout writes in the dust, "Staggerlee and Trout were here today. Maybe they will and maybe they won't be gay," and after sweeping away the evidence, Staggerlee asks, "You think the day'll come when you can write something like that in the dust and it won't faze anybody?" With a smile as she rewrites the names, Trout answers, "Guess it won't ever come if it doesn't start someplace, right?" (pp. 95–96).

We as English teachers have to start someplace, too. Orphea claims, "I don't know about in your school, but in mine, one of the worst things you can call someone is 'faggot' or 'dyke'" (p. 90), and at least one young boy in Decatur, Georgia, would have

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agreed with her. Alice Walker writes about the power of a writer in her essay about the suicide of Vincent Van Gogh, but a teacher must surely also hold some of that same power. In her words, “It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are ‘minority’ writers or ‘majority.’ It is simply in our power to do this” (p. 14). She continues by explaining why writers carry the responsibility. “We do it because we care. We care that Vincent Van Gogh mutilated his ear. We care that behind a pile of manure in the yard he destroyed his life . . . We care because we know this: the life we save is our own” (p. 14). As caring teachers, we too must realize that “the saving of lives” is what we are about, that one book can make all the difference in relieving the “absence of models,” and that we share the responsibility of opening minds and saving a life.

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siana public schools, and adolescent literature.

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