



Aliens among Us:

Exploring Identity and Identities in Young Adult Literature

Alien (*noun*) 1: a person of another family, race, or nation. 2: a foreign-born resident who has not been naturalized and is still a subject or citizen of a foreign country. (*adj*) *a*: belonging or relating to another person, place, or thing. *b*: relating, belonging, or owing allegiance to another country or government. *c*: differing in nature or character typically to the point of incompatibility.

Growing up, I always knew I was different. I had no word for what I was, no story to which I could affix myself. So it's only natural that I considered myself an alien. I remember sitting at my bedroom window night after night, searching the starry sky for hours and hoping to catch a glimpse of some tiny speck, proof that my extraterrestrial tribe was on its way back to earth to get me.

Then at 15, I was invited to be an apprentice at a summer stock theater located on an island off the coast of New Jersey, and everything changed. Even before I knew what the job entailed, I jumped at the opportunity to escape my hometown. The lure of the something “other” was too great, and despite the objections of my parents, I took off.

The theater's schedule was grueling—14 musicals in 14 weeks—and as an apprentice, I was expected to do anything and everything in exchange for a bunk in a crowded room crammed with eight or nine other boys. Along with my fellow apprentices, I served meals, cleaned and maintained the theater, built and moved the scenery, hung and ran the lights, and

eventually (to my great delight) was asked to grab a costume and step onto the stage. The job involved long hours, little sleep, no pay, and a slavish devotion to the legendary Joe Hayes, the man who had founded and managed the theater. What kept me in the game, what made me lose sleep and run myself ragged that whole summer, was the discovery of story.

At the time, I knew very little about the business of telling stories; I knew even less about the theater. I'd seen a few plays and had been involved in the odd school production featuring Pilgrims, but the business of people actually making a living by dressing up as someone else and telling stories on a well-lit stage in front of an eager audience was a revelation. Every night, I stood in the wings and watched as a leading actress transformed herself into a Sally Bowles or a Dolly Levi or a Mame; I studied Doug and Tom and Bob as they turned themselves into Tevye or Will Parker or Captain Von Trapp. I befriended these people during the day and then watched at night as they conjured a more fantastic persona, one designed for happy endings. I had discovered a nexus where two entirely separate realities were allowed to meet, where the story of Tevye lived inside the story of Doug. Might there be a more fantastic story rolled up inside of my everyday life, my own alternate persona waiting to be conjured? I was determined to find out.

Then one night about halfway through the summer, I found what I was looking for—I kissed a boy in the left mezzanine of the theater, and just like in those Greek myths that I'd been reading in school the year

before, I was instantly transformed. Overnight, I was allowed to shed my alien status. I had found my tribe, my story.

Before that summer, homosexuality was something to be avoided, ignored, resisted, and love was meant for movie stars. Way back in the Twentieth Century, homosexuality was rarely mentioned; it was a time when being gay or lesbian was still considered a form of mental illness, a crime, or worse. But ever since I could remember, it also had been a part of me, an urge that by its very nature couldn't be separated from who I was, because it was my nature. And yet, it had to remain unspoken and unacknowledged, even to myself. Disowning it took so much work, and in jettisoning that essential part of myself, I naturally lost touch with other parts as well—like my ability to love and the confidence to be fully myself. The fact is, I was so busy policing myself into a kind of submission, forcing myself to be someone other than myself, I didn't need anyone pushing me around.

At 15, I was an expert at bullying myself. But if I ever slacked off, there was no shortage of those who were happy to step in and do it for me. And not just people—a book could do it nicely. My brother owned a precious and dog-eared copy of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex*. I remember pouring over it, page by page, looking for some kind of validation or permission to feel the feelings that I thought were mine alone. Instead, I was shocked to discover that homosexuals were a class of men who had sex in bowling alley bathrooms and enjoyed activities such as putting light bulbs up their butts. Really? Homosexuality, I decided, was not for me. And so I kept quiet, fell below the radar, and made a decision to be less than myself. At a time when my peers were busy pressing themselves on top of girls in the back seat of cars, renting tuxedos, and coming into their own, I was trying desperately to pass. In a world where emotional development depended on my ability to participate, I fell behind a bit. I took to my room, imagined that I understood the lyrics of popular singing divas, sulked, decoupled my lunch box, made hand puppets with human hair, wore a dickie, read Jane Austen, and was cast in musicals.

Fortunately, that first kiss was more powerful than anything I'd yet encountered, and it managed to trump even my own desire to remain invisible. Love was no longer meant for other people, normal people,

people in movies and books—it belonged to me as well. I was part of the human race, and no one would deny me that right ever again. Love provided me with a story that I could believe in.

We are all storytellers. Every one of us arranges, discards, upends, and transforms the flimsy details of our personal circumstances until our lives and the world all around us makes some kind of sense, until we recognize ourselves in the landscape. Creating stories about ourselves, our parents, our ancestors, our work, and place of worship is one of the main features of our species and sets us apart from all others. Story is how we locate ourselves in the world and how we identify ourselves to one another, but even more important, it's how we come to know ourselves.

But as adolescents, we don't yet have the ability to create a proper narrative of our lives; we don't have the perspective necessary to make sense of certain events and to place each episode in its proper context. What does this mean? Why did that happen? How will this affect that? And that is one of the reasons why storytelling is so important to us when we are young adults; we are in the early stages of learning how to construct a narrative of our lives, and we need all the help we can get.

As my summer of love was coming to a close, my boyfriend slipped me Mary Renault's novel *The Last of the Wine*. A parting gift. He told me to read it while we were separated and perhaps I might see a bit of our own love reflected in the story. Though the book had been published in 1956 and the story was set in Ancient Greece, I was thrilled to discover that the plot involved a relationship between two men. Here was evidence that someone (other than me) believed that such a love was not only possible, but also desirable. If only I lived in ancient Greece.

When I returned to the routine life of a high school junior, I tried to make up for the loss of excitement by submerging myself in books. I read the stories of T. H. White, Charles Dickens, F. Scott

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Fitzgerald, Carson McCullers, J. D. Salinger, Charlotte Brontë, and Kurt Vonnegut. To be honest, I also turned to books because I wanted to find some kind of validation of the life I dreamed for myself, a blueprint; and though I never did find exactly what I was looking for, the habit of reading took hold in me, and eventually I found my way to writers like Denton Welch, James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes, writers who presented, if not exactly a homosexual slant, than certainly a queer one.

That same year, I was assigned to Mr. Shust's English class. Mr. Shust was a cranky and fastidious man of middle years who dressed in tweeds and flannel and insisted that his students keep a journal. He told us that the experience would enrich our lives (whatever that meant) and that we would be graded not on the quality of our writing, but on our willingness to participate.

So every evening after my homework was finished, I dutifully made an entry into the black-and-white speckled composition book. I began by chronicling the minor and major moments of my life, the hurts, hopes and heartbreaks, and soon writing had become a habit as well. That first journal turned into many, and by the time I was in my early twenties, I had a shelf filled with the written record of my adolescent years.

These books certainly came in handy years later when I began to write novels for young adults. My first book, *Absolute Brightness* (Harper Teen), is especially indebted to these journals for the many details of my summers on the Jersey coast. And my second novel, *Virgin Territory* (Egmont), also set in a seaside town during the summer months, explores issues of faith and love that I was struggling with and writing about in those early journals.

So, picture me a grown up, sitting at my desk and sipping morning coffee at the age of 35. Behind me, those composition books are lined up like witnesses never called upon to give their testimony. On the radio, a news report about teen suicide. According to the statistics, a young person who identifies as Gay or Lesbian is three to four times more likely to attempt

suicide than his or her heterosexual peers, and of all teen suicides, 33% can be attributed to homosexuality. I am appalled by this fact, shocked that nothing is being done to prevent the loss of what I consider our greatest natural resource—our youth. Instinctively, I turn to my old journals and I begin to read.

For the first time in years, I am reminded of just how confusing it was to be an adolescent, how painful and lonely. It is my story.

I then write the first few lines of a story about a 13-year-old boy who confides to his journal. I call him Trevor.

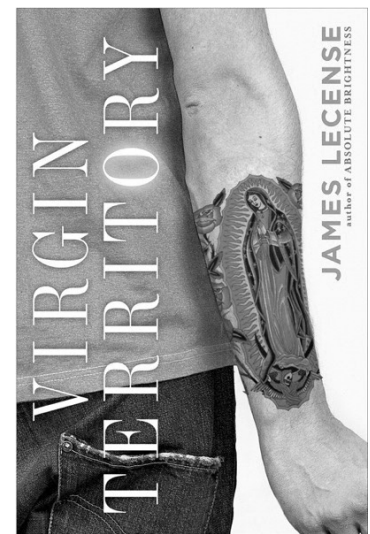
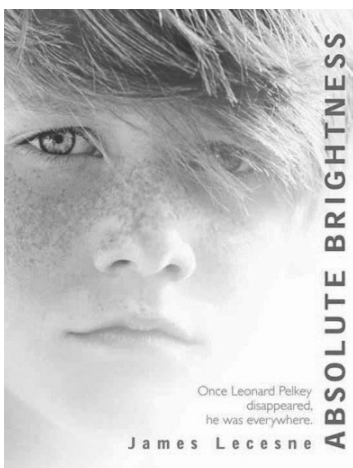
Dear Diary,

Tonight I walked into the living room while Mom and Dad were watching TV. Fell dead to the floor. No response from them. I think that television reruns have replaced their natural spontaneity. I mean, unless I'm on the eleven o'clock news, I don't think they'd care. And even then they might sleep through it.

And so the story began.

Eventually, Trevor discovers that he is different—different from his parents, different from his schoolmates, and different from his best friend. But when he realizes that he is gay and has no one in whom he can confide, he considers ending his life. *Trevor* is a poignant and surprisingly funny portrait of a boy in crisis, but it's about anyone who has ever felt as though they just can't get it right, that they don't fit in no matter how hard they try.

It wasn't that difficult to find the inspiration for Trevor. All of us have felt this way at one time or another, especially during our teenage years when we are just beginning to piece together a story of ourselves. Fortunately, my story was close to hand and my journals were stuffed with poems, rants, dreams,



prayers, vows, ideas, and remembrances of what it meant to be 14, 15, 16 The irony is that just as I was beginning to discover myself, I was becoming a stranger to the people I loved the most—my family. They couldn't know me, not really, because if they knew who I was, they would most certainly reject me. I couldn't live with that—not even as a possibility. And so I kept myself a secret from them, removed myself further and further from them, and began to explore life and love without them.

I went on to perform *Trevor* on stage as part of my solo show, *Word of Mouth*, and eventually the show found its way to the HBO Comedy Festival in Aspen, and then to Off Broadway where, incredibly, I won the Drama Desk Award for best solo performance of that year. One night following a performance of *Word of Mouth*, I met Randy Stone and Peggy Rajski, and they asked me to consider writing the screenplay for a short film based on the story of *Trevor*.

This 18-minute film (produced by Randy Stone and directed and produced by Peggy Rajski) went on to win many awards, including an Academy Award for Best Live Action Short. It was an exciting time as we watched our little film find an audience and spread the word that gay was okay—and at a time when LGBT issues were just beginning to find their way into the news. The times were changing, and *Trevor* was in some small way able to contribute to that change. In 1997 when we sold the film to HBO, we thought it might be a good idea to flash a telephone number at the end, just in case there happened to be a kid out there who could relate to the character of Trevor and needed someone to talk to. We wanted to let young people know that it was all right to reach out and ask for help. Someone would always be standing by to listen to their problems. But after doing some research, we found that there was no 24-hour crisis intervention and suicide prevention helpline for gay teens. And so we set about creating one.

Three months later, *The Trevor Project* was launched, and finally Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning teens had someplace to turn. That first night, we received over 1500 calls, and we've been at it ever since. Every year, we receive approximately 30,000 calls from young people around the country. Of course, not every call requires a rescue, and not all of the young people identify as LGBT, but every call comes from someone who is struggling

with issues of identity and is a person between the ages of 13 and 24 who is in need of someone who will listen. Thrown out of their homes, shunned by friends, often with no one to whom they can turn, these young people have found the help they need simply by calling *1-800-4-U-Trevor*.

These days, YA novels are full of lesbians and gays. Twenty-first century authors like David Levithan, Alex Sanchez, Jacqueline Woodson, Bill Konigsberg, and Mayra Lazara Dole write eloquently and often about the lives of LGBT teens. We don't have to travel to ancient Greece in order to find a reflection of our lives, because contemporary portraits closer to home abound. Perusing recent YA publishing lists of any major house, one might get the idea that it's not such a bad time to be a teen who is LGBT identified. But amazingly, alarmingly, the statistics today remain no better than they were over 20 years ago when I first sat down to write *Trevor*. LGBT youth are still killing themselves, and statistics indicate that they are in fact four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Fortunately, a solution now exists, and *The Trevor Project* is providing every young person with needed encouragement to fully live his or her own story. For over 14 years, *The Trevor Project* has been there for youth, listening to their stories, encouraging them to be fully themselves and, most important, saving them from taking their lives.

Recently, Dan Savage's very successful IT GETS BETTER campaign created a viral revolution and allowed adults to send out a message loud and clear to youth that life would indeed be better, if only they could hang on a bit. It also helped *The Trevor Project* become the go-to organization for youth who were struggling with their sexuality and identity. As a result, our call volume has spiked. We've opened a third call center, which is located in Harvey Milk's old camera shop in San Francisco and is fittingly dedicated to his memory.

We've also taken a much more active role in communicating to youth that we are there for them 24/7. In addition to the Lifeline, we've designed outreach and educational programs. We launched *TrevorSpace* last year, a secure online destination where youth can connect with one another, offer one another peer-to-peer support, and share information; in less than a year, close to 20,000 members have registered and are using the service. Another feature we offer is *Ask*

Trevor; young people can write in and ask questions that are not time sensitive, and our responses are then posted online. We have launched *Trevor Chat*, an online destination where teens can chat with a

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trained counselor and get some guidance *before* a crisis occurs, and we have also been instrumental in introducing anti-bullying legislation on the state and federal level. And finally, we have developed an in-school program where we train educators and students, meeting youth on their home turf and talking to them about the power of words and the value of listening.

And yet despite all our online services, we remain first and foremost a Lifeline, offering voice-to-voice communication, saving lives and working to normalize help-seeking behavior. In a world that is becoming increasingly de-personalized because of digital media, we remain dedicated to providing every young person, regardless of his or her identity, the opportunity to be heard—and they needn't wait until a crisis occurs to call on us. If I had understood at 14 that asking for help is an essential part of the human experience, I might have been able to get the help I needed sooner rather than later.

Of course, there is still much to do for youth everywhere. The passing of the Marriage Equality Act in New York State was a great win for youth who believe in the story of love; but the love of a teen in Texas is not yet equal to one living in New York, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, or

Washington D.C. And further afield, homosexuality is illegal in more than 30 African nations, and in some places is a crime punishable by death. In some Islamic countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen, homosexuality is a crime punishable by imprisonment, corporal punishment, or in some cases, execution. The globe has shrunk to the size of the worldwide Web, and every young person has access to it. They get the message, they hear the news, and we will have to work harder to change the story. Martin Luther King once said: "A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and his wisdom has perhaps never been better applied than to the struggle to make one person's love equal to everybody else's—regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation.

Changing the story of LGBTQ youth throughout the world and giving them the right to love is one way to ensure a better and more loving future for everyone. Young people, all of them, belong to our future, and without them we cannot hope to live into the world of tomorrow. Convincing even one kid that his or her life is worth living is to convince ourselves that the world itself is worth saving.

As I said, there is still so much work to be done. But *Trevor* stands as a major milestone and a miracle in my life. Next year, an updated version of *Trevor* will be published by Seven Stories Press, and hopefully a whole new generation of LGBTQ teens will be able to relate to the story. There may be aliens among us, but they are our aliens to love and to cherish and bring into the fold. I know because I was one of them, and it was story that saved me. All young people need to find a story that they can believe in, one that will bring them closer to understanding that they are a part of something bigger and better than themselves alone, something wonderful—and not just when they turn 25 or 35 or 45 years old—but right now.