

## *My Most Excellent Year: Staging Identities*

There are countless reasons for reading, but when you're young and uncertain of your identity, of who you may be, one of the most compelling is the quest to discover yourself reflected in the pages of a book. What a comfort that provides, seeing that you are not alone, that you are not—as you had feared—the only one of your kind.

—*How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity* (Cart [Ed.], 2012, p. 1)

**W**e first approached Steve Kluger's *My Most Excellent Year: A Novel of Love, Mary Poppins, & Fenway Park* (2008) as a superb novel to teach social justice with a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) framework (Buyserie, 2011). As a breakthrough LGBTQ novel, *My Most Excellent Year* meets seven of the nine qualities necessary for excellence in LGBTQ young adult novels that Hayn and Hazlett (2011) first envisioned in 1998: Sexuality is not the central issue of the novel; Augie Hwong, a gay teen, is one of three protagonists; Augie is multifaceted, admired, and, as director of the school musical, is in a leadership role; Augie has a wide circle of friends, including heterosexuals who actively support him; Augie is in a healthy, positive romantic relationship by the end of the novel; and, as an Asian American, Augie represents racial diversity. *My Most Excellent Year* shatters the old stereotypes of LGBTQ young adult (YA) literature to such an extent that the novel represents Hayn and Hazlett's most important wish and fulfills a seventh necessary quality; that is, by providing positive depictions of a gay teenager and his peers, *My Most Excellent Year* cannot be read as an exclusively LGBTQ novel, but one where "all characters are treated as adolescents living the teen experience, no matter their sexuality. Not only is this thematic change the

first item on [Hayn and Hazlett's] 1998 wish list, it is also the single most positive and defining movement toward LGBTQ adolescent works that . . . leave binding stereotypes behind" (p. 70).

*My Most Excellent Year* challenges not only stereotypes of LGBTQ novels, but of YA literature as a whole, making the novel's specific genre delightfully difficult to pin down. Is the book a suite of love stories? A chorus of coming-of-age stories? Is it a utopia in the making where differences unite rather than divide? Is it a musical in prose, all the characters crooning happily as the curtain drops at the end? It is all these and more, but most of all, *My Most Excellent Year* is a novel that allows adolescent—and adult—readers to rehearse a host of empowering identities. If Alsup (2010) is correct in saying that "reading literature suddenly becomes a very personal act . . . as readers come to terms with developmental problems and challenges through vicarious experience of the trials and tribulations of teen protagonists" (p. 7), then *My Most Excellent Year* may be an ideal text for adolescent identity formation.

Many YA novels afford room for their protagonists to try on different identities, some with relative safety. In turn, the readers of these novels—typically young adults themselves—can also don some of these same identities. These new identities, though

often powerful, are usually limited in scope. To fully develop these characters' identities, authors typically only provide them with the opportunity to try on one or two different identities at most. A broader range of identities are explored by Virginia Euwer Wolff's LaVaughn (*Make Lemonade*, 1993), who tries on the identities of parent, future college student, and social worker, alongside dutiful daughter, while other identities, such as girlfriend or best friend, remain undeveloped until the next book in the trilogy, *True Believer* (2001). While LaVaughn does try on a relatively wide range of identities over the course of two novels, roles that most YA characters in other books don't begin to access, in overflowing contrast, *My Most Excellent Year* allows its characters multiple and various identities within a single text, providing young readers with many transformative models.

However, this book is not just written for the YA crowd. Parents and other adults have equal access to this narrative, as the parents of the teen protagonists take their own turns at narrating parts of the story. Through their letters, memos, and emails to each other and to their children, we learn how to be loving and supportive parents, parents who are extremely skilled at talking to their teenagers. But we also learn how to help our teenagers campaign for civil rights, help our gay son quite effortlessly come out to the world, even though everyone already knew he was gay, and "be a pain in the ass" (p. 21)—when called for, of course.

Perhaps most intriguing, the novel itself gets into the act, trying on different identities: part YA literature, part fiction for anyone of any age, the novel perhaps makes its most dramatic identity shift when it takes on the guise of a musical, a genre known for its suspension of disbelief. Though not written as a musical script, but rather in a series of multigenre snippets that parallel the episodic structure of a musical, the book itself takes on narrative challenges that are successfully resolved in family-friendly productions.

The novel takes its cues from the characters who, both literally and figuratively, sing and dance their way to stardom, fame, romance—and who come out to an entire high school without anyone batting an eye. While Augie, T. C. Keller, and Alejandra Perez narrate the story in turn, the supporting cast is given voice: two fathers, one mother, an advisor, a best friend, a boyfriend, and a soon-to-be-adopted brother.

True characters in their own right, all take their turns in the spotlight, helped along by outstanding dialogue. In one scene, Augie's father shows us all how to be emotionally in touch with our children, delivering words of comfort that are truly inspirational. Rather than pretending to be true to life, the characters have apparently memorized Kluger's superb script.

Yet this story is no spoof: it's magic. Through the guise of a musical, both characters and readers learn to suspend their disbelief and believe in magic—real transformative magic. We

believe that a little deaf orphan boy can meet Mary Poppins, his dream nanny, while realizing he can be content with the actual people who love him; a teenage boy can learn that he has to stop trying to impress if he wants to get the girl; the same girl can learn that she doesn't have to stand in the shadow of her politically connected family to be a star; and another teen boy can come out to the world with no pains of suffering or fear—perfect acceptance from friends and family alike.

Take your places, readers. It's showtime!

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### **Spotlight 1: T. C. Keller**

Despite the book's musical theme, T. C. is ironically the one leading character not asked to audition for the school's production of *Kiss Me, Kate*. "What a bunch of cheesers" (p. 143) is his response to this oversight, as he had just achieved a second-place finish in the school's talent show with his recitation of JFK's inaugural speech—a role he took on primarily to win the heart of Alejandra, or Alé, whose commitment to political activism is rather deeper than T. C.'s initial understanding of relationships with girls.

Known by a variety of names—"Tick" (to Augie), "Anthony" (to Alé), and "Tony C" (to Pop, his father), not to mention Red Sox fan, adopted "big brother" to a deaf orphan boy named Hucky, and teen member of a congressional committee—T.C.'s storyline assures us that simultaneously embodying multiple identi-

## An Interview with Steve Kluger

**B&H:** *Though your book is not written as a literal musical script, we clearly saw many parallels between the story and the musical genre. How would you respond to this comparison?*

**Kluger:** I grew up on (a) Broadway musicals, and (b) *I Love Lucy*. My entire life has been grounded in those two “realities.” In fact, when I was 15 and tried to buy a ticket to the Tony Awards, I discovered they were sold out—so my only recourse was to tell the stage doorman at the Shubert Theatre that my mother—Carol Channing—had forgotten to leave my ticket at the box office. (You’ve already read what happened after that.) All that was missing was Ethel Mertz whispering urgently in my ear, “Lucy, let’s get out of here.” And as to the musical comedy aspect of things, my hands-down favorite review quote came from *Entertainment Weekly* regarding my third (and favorite) novel, *Almost like Being in Love*: “As breezy and preposterous as a Broadway musical.” Real life feels a lot better when it’s got a score by Jerry Herman or Kander and Ebb.

**B&H:** *In the article, we argue that the book could be instrumental in helping teens and their parents try on new roles. In particular, we admire the book because the parents get to be key players in the story. What response have you had from teens and parents who have read your book?*

**Kluger:** Parents and tweens tend to respond strongly in favor of it; teens tend to be divided on whether or not there’s any merit to it at all, in terms of being even remotely realistic. Clearly, it’s an entirely subjective point of view that depends on what the particular teen’s personal experience has been. From my own perspective, I was merely chronicling the extended family that my niece and nephew, Emily and Noah, have been brought up to call their own. When my sister-in-law Lori (Lori Mahoney in the novel) was pregnant with Emily, she registered with a website that networked her with four other expectant mothers in and around her zip code who were all due to give birth to their respective firstborns the same month. This is how the August Mom’s Club was born (“Auggies” for short).

That was 14 years and almost a dozen children

ago, and now it’s tough to remember who belongs to whom biologically; there are 11 kids who think I’m their uncle (which caused some territorial problems for Noah early on, but which he’s come to understand for what it is). In addition to the regular extended-family events (including the annual stay at a big old house in Big Bear over MLK weekend), the openness and support structure between kids and parents is exactly what’s depicted in *My Most Excellent Year*.

And indeed, it’s sometimes tough to figure out who’s the adult and who’s the child. Seven years ago, I was at an Auggies cookout, playing in the backyard with most of the kids (the favored game was always “Let’s Get Uncle Stevie,” which, translated into legal terms, means “assault and battery”). After about half an hour, I went into the house to catch a breather and discovered four-year-old Noah and five-year-old “nephew” Joey watching *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* on TV. So I sat down with them, popped a can of Diet Coke, and downed it in three gulps. Since this instantly caused me to inflate like a medicine ball, I saw an easy way of getting a cheap laugh from the kids by letting out a burp that registered on the Richter scale. Noah giggled mildly, but Joey didn’t. Without taking his attention away from the Power Rangers, he rolled his eyes, sighed impatiently, then turned to me and demanded, “Say ‘excuse me’.” Which I immediately did, just prior to going into the den and collapsing onto the couch in laughter. There’s nothing quite like being busted by a five-year-old.

**B&H:** *The focus of the article is on shaping identities. From your website and other books, it’s clear that you share many identities that the characters try on (Red Sox fan, movie lover, political activist, supporter of LGBT youth). Do you feel that you share all the identities in the book or are there some that you tried on just for the story?*

**Kluger:** It’s all real-life stuff. I wouldn’t know how to make up any of it if I hadn’t lived it myself—especially when I’m writing about (and for) kids. They keep you honest.

**B&H:** *In our article, we claim that Hucky is the plot catalyst, and we’ve discussed how very different the book would be without him, as he allows T. C., Augie,*

and Alé to try on the role of parent, which gives each of these characters a depth that they might not otherwise have had. When did Hucky come into the picture?

**Kluger:** Hucky was a character I first came up with in 1982, but for whom I was never able to find the right story—and I tried about a half-dozen times. At various stages, his age ranged from 6 to 11, sometimes he was deaf and sometimes he wasn't, occasionally he had parents named Ben and Louise, and I remember that once he lived in Indiana (I'm sure there was a reason, but it escapes me entirely now). The only thing he didn't have was a personality, so I put him away and promised him I'd find the right story for him eventually.

Years later, Noah was born, and when I came up with the premise for *My Most Excellent Year*, I brought Hucky Harper back and turned him into a deaf version of my nephew, right down to the hangaburs, his mad face, and his stuffed dog named Shut-the-Door (no adult could make up a name like that). And the catalyst that brought Noah and Hucky together and gave me the novel's theme was the purple balloon story—which happened to us when Noah was 3 1/2.

**B&H:** We also argue, based on Hayn & Hazlett's wish list, that the novel is not a coming-out LGBTQ novel because it shatters the constraints of many LGBTQ storylines. Was this intentional? If so, how did you shape the characters and plot to attain this?

**Kluger:** It was intentional, but I didn't have to do anything to shape the characters or the story. Augie is me when I was that age, except for the fact that I had to stay quiet about it if I wanted to keep my teeth. I was a diva, and I was *fabulous* at it. So when it came time to write the novel, I named myself Augie, made myself Chinese (*Flower Drum Song* was my favorite musical when I was 6; come to think of it, I was listening to the overture on my iPod this morning), and put myself in an era where gay-straight alliances and out kids were so *not* unusual in urban schools that I actually had a chance—through Augie—to live the kind of open adolescence I'd have lived if I'd been born 35 years later.

**B&H:** Would you characterize your book as *Young Adult Lit* or something else?

**Kluger:** It was written as an adult novel in much the

same way my second one—*Last Days of Summer*—was written. After a year in print, *LDOS* (*Last Days of Summer*) made the jump by itself into the Young Adult category and has since become a staple in high school English classes. Twelve years ago, you'd have found it in the general fiction section of the library; these days you're just as likely to find it in YA as well (or instead). But by the time I wrote *My Most Excellent Year*, the YA market had grown so enormously that the novel was automatically tagged as YA. That wouldn't have happened in 1998. Which says a *lot* about how savvy kids have become.

**B&H:** We obviously love the book, and Crag has included the book in several of the college-level courses he's taught (and Beth has published another article about the book). If teachers were to use *My Most Excellent Year* in the high school classroom, what would you hope that students (and perhaps teachers and administrators) would gain from the book?

**Kluger:** The four themes that are self-evident: (1) being different is just about the coolest thing you can possibly aspire to; (2) real-life magic happens every day of your life if you just open your eyes and look (the stage doorman at the Shubert was my first witness to that); (3) you can achieve anything you want to achieve just by using your head and Lucy Ricardo's determination (the stage doorman at the Shubert was my first witness to that, too); and (4) Ethel Merman is God.

**B&H:** During Crag's teaching, he's also heard the occasional complaint that the book is not realistic (Alé has a bodyguard, Augie learns he's gay without any real backlash, etc.). We compare the book to a musical to emphasize that readers should approach the book with a good dose of suspension of disbelief, but we also feel the book is rooted in reality and that the identities that the characters try on are attainable. How do you respond to these types of criticisms/concerns?

**Kluger:** This always makes me laugh. Teens can find realism in novels about vampires, but not in novels where kids are accepted for who they are and occasionally have nurturing and supportive relationships with their parents. This kind of gives you a clue about how tough it must be to be a kid these days, but I'm still holding fast to the possibility that a world like that can exist. It's the Broadway musical thing again. I also believe that Brigadoon comes to life out of the Scottish mist once every hundred years . . .

ties can be empowering. Stringer (1997) supports this possibility, arguing, “Identity achievement and self-understanding provide the psychological freedom that enables us to balance self-reflection with realistic action” (p. 1). While T. C., Alé, and Augie’s ambitions are often based more in idealism than realism (Augie wants to hire Coretta Scott King to emcee their talent show), their ability to achieve Stringer’s concepts of “identity achievement and self-understanding” comes

directly from simultaneously occupying multiple roles, each shaping and challenging the other roles in their own lives and the lives of their friends and family.

When we first meet him, T. C. takes pride in a few roles that some people, specifically his advisor and his future girlfriend, consider less than ideal. First, he touts his status as a B+ student, simply because he

wants to be a “chip off the old block” (his dad, Pop, was a B+ student in college) and he *doesn’t* want to be a “poser”—two arguments that drive his advisor, Lori, nuts. Second, he is always planning his next move with Alé, a characteristic that, unsurprisingly, does not impress her. Yet with these initial flaws, and despite Alé’s and Lori’s initial doubts, T. C. is the genuine article. In this sense, he doesn’t simply “try on” the role of friend, he is the epitome of friendship. No one under his care is left to fend for themselves; in one way or another, T. C. supports Augie, Alé, Hucky, and even his Pop, for life.

Scene Change: *T. C.’s first-grade year when T. C. first meets Augie.* Augie, an American-born Chinese forced by his FOB (“Fresh Off the Boat”), civil-rights-crusading mother to eat bok choy and sprouts for lunch, described himself as “a professional sideline watcher”; at the same time, T. C. was unaware of the fact that “in first grade everybody wanted to be Tick” (p. 6)—until, of course, his mother died. After her death, T. C. sees through everyone’s platitudes that things will be okay and turns for the first time to Augie, who “was the only one who knew what to say and how to say it” (p. 3). As T. C. comments, “Any-

body who can pull off something like that for you isn’t just a best friend—that’s brother territory. So Augie told his mom and dad that they had a new son, and I told Pop the same thing. Screw biology” (p. 3).

From that point on, T. C. and Augie assume the role of brothers. We realize quickly, as they do, that the relationship means more than just playing *Galaxy Fighters* and having sleepovers. Rather, T. C. shows us all how to care about our friends; it is important to note that he is also one of our primary guides toward supporting LGBTQ youth. Granted, when Augie first asks what T. C. would say if he knew Augie liked boys, T. C.’s response of “Duh” may not have been poetic, but his follow-up response rings true: “Who’s the boy?” and “I need to see how he treats you first” (p. 106). Later, Augie briefly questions his own worth after Andy, his new boyfriend, attacks Augie’s masculinity, a move prompted by Augie’s love of divas but dismissive of Augie’s talent on the soccer field. T. C. immediately sees right through Augie’s insecurities, even though the brothers are IMing at the time:

**AugieHwong:** Tick, have you ever been ashamed of me?

**TCKeller:** I’ll kick his ass.

**AugieHwong:** Whose??

**TCKeller:** Andy’s. Is that what he said to you???

**AugieHwong:** No. I mean, not exactly. But wouldn’t I be less of a freak if I acted like a normal guy once in a while?

**TCKeller:** And turn into somebody your own brother wouldn’t even recognize??? I swear to God I’m going to kick his ass.

**AugieHwong:** You don’t have to. You just answered my question. (p. 290)

To clarify, no actual violence occurs, and Augie is perfectly capable of taking care of Andy’s indiscretion on his own in a way that validates their relationship and shows the whole school how to come out with style. But T. C.’s confidence in Augie proves to be exactly the type of support Augie needs. Indeed, T. C.’s natural incredulity that Augie should act “normally”

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is one we can all take to heart, particularly when discussing LGBTQ issues: through the brothers' conversation, sexual identity—not homophobia—becomes normative and normal. And while T. C.'s grades may suffer slightly from his distrust of straight-A posers, T. C. knows on one level that being a poser with your friends—and maintaining social inequalities—is pure crap.

On another level, however, T. C. at times exemplifies the role of poser in his pursuit of Alé, for he is constantly plotting his next move with her—acts that, of course, Alé quickly spots for the frauds they are (though some moves *are* honest, catching her off guard). While Alé is admittedly also falling for T. C., T. C. keeps losing ground precisely because he is not genuine, at least not consistently. Fortunately for him, he also meets Hucky, a six-year-old deaf orphan boy who decides T. C.'s baseball skills are worth improving. (Hucky reads the signs sent by the opposing team to feed T. C. the best pitches—unless Hucky is mad at T. C., in which case T. C. strikes out.) In typical T. C. fashion, T. C. commits himself to Hucky and strives to help Hucky achieve his wish that Mary Poppins will one day come take care of him. T. C., perhaps subconsciously, recognizes himself in Hucky, a young boy with no mother to take care of him. From then on, T. C. takes it upon himself to teach Hucky about magic of various kinds, but particularly the kind of magic that happens when people love you.

During the course of the novel, T. C.'s commitment to Hucky permanently shapes T. C.'s identity, allowing T. C. to realize the importance of being genuine (lessons he already knows when dealing with friends, but ones he finds more complicated when translating to romance). He stops his schemes with Alé, helps her raise a baseball diamond at Manzanar, and introduces Hucky to the real Mary Poppins.

Naturally. Musical, remember?

## Spotlight 2: Augie Hwong

Augie is a director par excellence, leading non-drama “civilians” (p. 241) like T. C. and Andy to inspiring performances in the talent show, an arena they had never imagined they would play in. Instrumentally, he “discovers” Alé and jumpstarts her promising singing career by casting her in the finale of the talent show, a performance that wins her first prize. For his tour de

force, he orchestrates a plan to bring T. C. and Hucky face-to-face with Mary Poppins, aka Julie Andrews. T.C. is impressed with Augie's leadership skills: “The kids love him and I can understand why . . . I always knew that Augie could push the edge of any envelope whenever he wanted to” (p. 95). His leadership extends to other parts of the school as well, influencing two other freshmen to come out of the closet and encouraging other hopeful actors to refine their natural performing abilities.

But he's also a leading man—or leading lady (think Katherine Hepburn)—worthy of Tony Award consideration. He does almost everything with brimming confidence—except fall in love. Comfortable in the very different roles of theater whiz kid and star athlete (he is a scoring machine in soccer and letters in swimming and track), the only stumble Augie makes on the stage of his life is in his relationship with Andy. As Alé observed after the auditions for the talent show, “Augie seemed back to normal again. Or at least as normal as you can be when you're Augie, when your life has turned upside down practically overnight, and when you're not confident enough to share the news with anyone else yet—not even the people who love you the most” (p. 80).

After Hucky asks Augie why Andy doesn't know that Augie loves him, Augie finally makes the first move and reaches out to hold Andy's hand at the movies. Andy responds, yet the relationship is still difficult for Andy: he's worried about how his father, a former Air Force pilot, might react, and he's uncomfortable with how Augie comports himself in public (Augie's serenade to Andy at a café impresses all listeners but Andy). In a private chat, Andy writes, “Augie, you're a guy. Once in a while you need to remind people before they forget” (p. 261). But even when romance doesn't go his way, Augie takes the lead in the relationship, refining Andy's performance in comparison to his own. Andy eventually comes around to accepting Augie as his boyfriend just as he is: “maybe you *are* the only boy in the world. Even

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when you're Gypsy Rose Lee" (p. 308).

Bolstered by his supporting actors—T. C., Alé, mutual friend Lee, Hucky, and his parents—Augie plays through the bump in his confidence. Together, as cast members, they bring out the best in each other. Indeed, the critical role his parents play behind

the scenes cannot be overstated. For many LGBTQ families, coming out can be a traumatic event; the parents may even, as in Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* (2003), disown their child. Augie's parents, however, are his buttresses. In a letter to T. C.'s dad, Craig Hwong writes: "Augie's almost fifteen and about three steps away from Adolescent Hell—but he still hasn't told us he's gay yet. He couldn't possibly think it would make

any difference to us. Wei and I have been encouraging him to be himself ever since he memorized *Annie Get Your Gun* at the age of two" (p. 53). Still, his father recognizes that life could be difficult for Augie: "As a gay kid he'll be a natural leader. Put him in a macho bullshit environment and he's going to have a hard time" (p. 55).

Craig's relationship with Augie is one to which all fathers should aspire, as the father-son duo can talk about anything: "Dad? Is love supposed to hurt?" (p. 187). Craig asks Augie to describe what he feels when he thinks about Andy, and Craig would in turn relate "what it was like when the same roller coaster got ahold" of him (p. 187), trusting that "All [Augie] really needed to hear was that he's not the first kid who's had to go through this" (p. 188). Andy himself acknowledges how effortlessly Augie's parents accept his sexuality: "It's the way your parents know we're boyfriends and we never had to tell them. And they're *happy* about it" (p. 311). Moreover, Craig has a refreshing sense of humor about his son's disorienting love life. He writes in an e-memo to T. C.'s father: "Andy kissed Augie on Sunday, and now we keep misplacing our son. Half an hour ago I found him sitting in a broken armchair in the basement with a

blank stare on his face. And he couldn't remember how he'd gotten there" (p. 333).

As director and actor, Augie Hwong thrives in the spotlight, modeling a take-charge mindset for readers of all ages. Possessing certitude rare in an adolescent, Augie is aware of his uniqueness. Quoting American composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, he exclaims:

"Here's to us.  
Who's like us?  
Damn few." (p. 392)

### Spotlight 3: Alejandra Perez

Out of the three teens, Alé begins the novel with the most rigidly defined roles: daughter of the former Ambassador to Mexico, "stuck-up" rich kid with a bodyguard, current political activist, straight-A student, and—even at age 14—"prepared to settle for a loveless career in the diplomatic corps because it was proper and expected" (p. 335), *despite* both her status as "persona non grata all along Embassy Row" (p. 12; she's been unintentionally insulting prime ministers since the age of five) and her hidden desire to be a dancer. As we eventually learn, Alé creates some of these expectations for herself, while others are indeed handed to her. Her parents, unlike T.C. and Augie's collective set of parents, never step in as temporary narrators of the novel. Their silence with us illustrates their lack of communication with their daughter on anything not related to diplomacy. Nor does Alé realize until well into the novel that she is partly responsible for the lapse in communication between daughter and parents.

Alé's also the newcomer to Brookline, Massachusetts, and she has a little trouble fitting into a regular high school where there are "No nannies, no bodyguards, no heads of state, no dinners with Chelsea Clinton or Tobey Maguire, and no one who wouldn't think you were a stuck-up pain in the ass if you mentioned either one of them" (p. 14). Fortunately for her, she's soon sought out and befriended by Augie, whose love of theatre and famous personalities allows him to see Alé's connections in a favorable light, and Lee Meyerhoff, who, though now the most popular girl in the 9th grade, was once the outcast rich kid herself. Admittedly, there's a brief problematic moment when we as an audience fear that Lee and Alé are trying on the role of "dumb girl" just to be popular, but that fear

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is quickly assuaged by Lee and Alé's exposé of the farce, and by the end of the book, they've landed the titles of President and Vice President of the Student Council. Clearly, the girls were just using the stereotypical role of dumb girl as a way to enter the hearts of the masses and launch their political campaign, for committed political activist is the one role that Alé embraces throughout the book, despite her hesitation with the new roles of friend, girlfriend, and believer of magic.

Despite Alé's resistance, Augie effortlessly directs Alé as she tries on her new roles. By paralleling Augie's own coming out, Alé succeeds in coming out to herself and to her family—with Augie's intervention, of course. First, by talking to her before she's popular, Augie completely ignores the social expectations of fitting in just because you're supposed to, foreshadowing how he manages to come out to a bunch of 9th graders with perfect grace and acceptance. He also tricks her, with a little help from Lee, into performing the song and dance routine "The Music and the Mirror" in the talent show, where she wins first prize and is handpicked by the principal for the lead in the next school play, *Kiss Me, Kate*.

As we learn, these are just the first two steps not only toward her "promising career" (p. 346), but also toward helping her family see her true passion. By the end of the novel, her family, though still without narration rights, both supports her dramatic debut *and* uses her musical career to advance their diplomatic exchanges, allowing Alé both to achieve her dream of singing and dancing *and* create a spot for herself within her ambassador family. Rather than remaining a girl who chooses Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis for a role model—a woman whom Alé eventually confesses "associate[d] with kings, duchesses, and the top 4 percent of the social register . . . [but had] two marriages [that] were regal but joyless" (p. 334)—Alé switches her allegiances to Mary Poppins, a woman whose abilities she had earlier rejected because, at the age of seven, she "simply couldn't accept umbrellas as a believable means of air travel" (p. 335). The new Alé clearly doesn't have a problem with such affronts to the laws of physics.

Augie and Lee help Alé come out of her shell, but they're not alone. As we've seen, Alé is also befriended by T. C. Keller, though his advances are not purely congenial in nature. His initial attempts at suave,

9th-grade-boy romance leave her unimpressed, but her family's unspoken expectations—or Alé's interpretation of these expectations—that she is to marry high within the social registry further complicates their relationship, even after T. C. performs JFK's inaugural speech for her at the talent show, convinces her to learn sign language so that she can talk with Hucky, and helps her launch her campaign to restore the Manzanar baseball diamond. Of course, T.

C.'s constant plotting doesn't help, but even after he proves he's genuine, Alé still needs to wait for inspiration from Mary Poppins before she reconsiders her true feelings. She also needs time, for as she says, "You don't plan falling in love the way you plan a formal dinner for twelve"

(p. 351). By the end of the novel, Alé discovers that the best role of all *is* being loved for who you are; with T.C., Augie, Lee, and Hucky's help, she learns how to find and love herself first—a performance worthy of her standing ovation.

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**By the end of the novel, Alé discovers that the best role of all *is* being loved for who you are; . . . a performance worthy of her standing ovation.**

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#### **Spotlight 4: Hucky Harper**

One of the primary plot catalysts—or the mover and shaker of several plots—Hucky does not enter the novel until page 97 when T. C. notices him at a baseball game, nor is he named until page 143. His delayed entry links and overarches the multiple relationship plots (T. C. and Alé, Augie and Andy, T. C.'s father and his girlfriend, Lori) and propels the novel to enchanted places it may never have imagined it would go, including to New York to meet Mary Poppins.

Initially, Hucky, a six-year-old deaf boy, appears to be profoundly alone, donning a fierce mask so no one can get close. Abandoned by his mother, in and out of foster homes, Hucky nonetheless reaches out to T. C., helping T. C.'s batting average by passing on the pitching signs. Hucky, who Augie believes is like a younger T. C., is emotionally frozen, his identity formation in stasis. Numbed by his experiences, repeatedly betrayed by adults, Hucky is a child unwilling to try on new clothes. Instead, he clings to miracles,



waiting for Mary Poppins to swoop in to rescue him from his problems.

During the second half of the novel, Hucky drives some of the most significant elements of the plot, bringing the characters together in important ways. He serves as the glue between Alé and T. C., as Alé

recognizes that T.C. is not hanging out with Hucky merely to impress her, but that he cares deeply for the boy—which *does* impress her. Hucky also inspires Augie to hold hands with Andy at the movies, taking “affirmative action” (p. 246) in their relationship. In addition, Alé, T. C., and Augie commit to resolve Hucky’s emotional issues,

planning a magical meeting with Mary Poppins in New York.

As Hucky thaws, he provides opportunities for Augie, T. C., and Alé to try on the role of adults, arranging outings around the city and sleepovers at T. C.’s, and providing succor and support when he, Hucky, is upset. T. C. escapes severe punishment from his father for taking Hucky to New York without permission because, as Pop quickly recognizes, T. C. undertook this action not for selfish reasons, but for a greater good. Besides, the crazy plan to get Hucky in to see Julie Andrews on Broadway actually succeeds.

As a story that ends happily, Hucky becomes a son, a brother, a lunch menu activist, and, perhaps most of all, a Red Sox fan in all its grief and glory.

### Spotlight 5: The Parents

As highlighted above, the parents play critical roles as stage managers and behind-the-scenes supporters for their children, though Alé’s parents, particularly her father, lurk in the wings for much of the novel, remaining essentially unresponsive. In contrast, Augie’s father, Craig, shines as a father, as seen in Spotlight 2—a stellar performance for which he should win a Tony Award, if not a Nobel Peace Prize, for Parenting. He also plays the role of dating counselor with Ted, T. C.’s father, teasing him into pursuing a deeper relationship with Lori, T. C.’s advisor. In addition

to the two fathers, Augie’s mother, Wei, though not as prominent, has also deeply etched her influence on her son, sparking his passion for musicals. As a reviewer for the *Boston Globe* and a fierce critic of ethnic and gender stereotypes in the theater, Wei’s two-sentence review of *Carousel* signals to Augie the importance of gender equality: “Nice songs to beat your wife to. Attend at your own risk” (p. 112).

Like T. C., Ted also promotes equality for all sexual identities. One role that Ted takes in stride is his role as surrogate parent of a gay son. He provides important support for Craig by insisting that Augie isn’t hiding anything: either “(a) he doesn’t know it himself yet or (b) he’s straight” (p. 54). Either way, if it’s right for Augie, it’s right for Ted. Furthermore, Ted slips smoothly into the clothing of the parent of a new child, adopting Hucky with open arms. Ted stumbles, however, as a widower (his wife told him to get remarried or she “would kick his ass,” p. 22); he hasn’t been taking the dating process with appropriate gravitas. In fact, Ted and Lori, early in their relationship, act more as adolescents, teasing and flirting, downplaying their attraction to one another. Yet how do adults who have been friends for years become romantically involved? There appears to be no script for such a relationship. Though Lori has been looking out for T.C. since his mother’s death, and is in effect part of the family already, she only assumes a parental role when she urges leniency for the “T. C. and Hucky meet Mary Poppins” adventure on the “slim chance [she] might have a future say in the care and feeding of Anthony” (p. 381).

T. C.’s real mother, though deceased, is perhaps one of the most important parents in the novel, as T. C. addresses her at length in each of his chapters, keeping her apprised of the important events in his life. His mother may not be trying on any new identities of her own, but T. C. reinforces his own identity as he recognizes and accepts the gifts she has given him. As he stumbles through his relationships with Alé and Hucky, he asks his mother for help, imploring her to give him the kind of advice a mother would offer a son about dating and raising a child. Before she died, T. C.’s mother helped him to believe in magic, shepherding a lost purple balloon across the state to prove to T. C. that the missing item was simply looking for him—and would find him in the end. Years later, T. C. realizes his mother taught him to “Never,

ever stop believing in magic” (p. 403), to know that loved ones will always make sure you have a purple balloon when you need it. Bestowed with his own magic, he can now act for others as his mother acted for him.

## Finale

Young adult literature has been touted as a rehearsal stage for the identity formation of its readers (Alsup, 2010; Aaronson, 2001; Bean & Moni, 2003; Spanke, 2010; Stringer, 1997; and others). Alsup (2010) specifically suggests that teaching literature “might be the key to positive identity growth and development for teen readers” (p. 4). Based on this premise, Alsup speculates whether literature written primarily for adolescent readers “about teen characters having life-like problems, [could] be the ideal genre to prompt and support such positive identity growth” (p. 4). Can exposure to various identity models through YA literature provide the kind of reinforcement adolescents may not receive—or relate to—through other means and help them form positive identities? We envision future research projects that study whether classroom use of novels such as *My Most Excellent Year* explicitly contribute to positive identity formation, bearing in mind Alsup’s concerns regarding power, ethics, and morals that English teachers must consider as they assign texts that may shape students’ lives (p. 5). In the meantime, we offer *My Most Excellent Year* as a transformative classroom text that emphasizes positive identity formation.

Despite the challenges English teachers face as they strive not to impart their own personal morals onto students, Alsup also argues that many English teachers “believe that education is . . . is about the growth and development of human psyches that are thoughtful, empathetic, and open-minded, in addition to intelligent” (p. 7). If students read to grow, to know who they are in relation to others in the world, if they read to measure how their actions contribute to or disrupt our community, then novels such as *My Most Excellent Year* surely provide a wealth of material for such self-study, both in and out of the classroom.

For adolescents, particularly for LGBTQ teens—and for parents and teachers—this novel is a wardrobe thrown open. It encourages readers of all ages to try on as many identities as they can, keeping the ones

that fit. It compels parents to model for their children the acceptance of a variety of gender and sexuality roles. And it urges both younger readers and their parents to communicate the mutual trust that boosts adolescents toward adulthood—an important skill for all, and especially crucial for LGBTQ families. To our students, the novel showcases how to support all their peers by tapping into each other’s abilities, rather than judging each other by what they do not possess or by what mainstream society expects of them.

To emphasize these supportive roles for friends and family, we have spotlighted three protagonists, their new brother, Hucky, and their parents. We have shown the multiple identities each of these characters tried on, keeping some while rejecting others. T. C. no longer needs to plot his way into a girl’s heart but can now connect his

political interests with romance, all while remembering that love is worth waiting for; Alé has stepped out of her parents’ expectations into her own light as a singer and dancer, while retaining her fierce activism; Augie, though always the confident and talented actor, uses the lessons from his first romantic relationship to embrace his new role as a gifted director, creating masterpieces with his actors’ latent talents; Hucky chucks his hands-off mask and begins to thrive with others; and the adults solidify their roles—no longer merely supporting actors, these role models help the parents in the audience become integrally connected with their own children while allowing the teens in the audience to validate their parents’ trust. It may seem all too neat and tidy and impossible, but remember what a magical musical can do: let us glow in harmony for a few moments before we re-enter our own often baffling lives. The curtain may fall, but we can take the best of the show with us when we leave.

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