

## Stories from the Field

### Fictional Characters and Living People Experience a Political Victory

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In my young adult literature course, we explore numerous ways authors play with and work with the overarching theme of identity. One assignment involves novels featuring characters who are gay; concurrently, we read articles and discuss GLBTQ issues. Often students tell me it's their first experience encountering protagonists talking about sexual orientation, and usually good things result. Occasionally, a student asks if he or she can opt out of the assignment or read an alternative selection. I encourage students who express discomfort or disagreement to read a few of the choices just to get to know the characters and to listen to their stories. I point out that these teens we're meeting through our reading didn't exist, didn't live, before authors created them. For example, John Green and David Levithan introduce us to two boys who share the name Will Grayson; Steve Kluger invites us to listen to three narrators who complete the school essay assignment, "*My Most Excellent Year*"; James Howe gives us *The Misfits* who band together politically and combat some bullies, and then he helps one of those misfits to provide a deeper self-portrait in *Totally Joe*.

At 11:49 on Friday, June 24, 2011, I received an email containing a link to breaking news. Cari wrote:

Dear Professor Kane,

In the midst of the legalization of gay marriage and my reading of my book with a gay character, I couldn't help but think you somehow planned this week's book selection to coincide with this momentous occasion! I couldn't help but send this [link to a news article] to you along with some of my newfound excitement and hope for the gay characters in our books. . . .

While I cannot accept any personal credit regarding New York's legislation, I felt affirmed. Isn't this why we teach literature, so that characters become real for readers, so that we empathize with the books' people, feeling their suffering, sharing their burdens, rejoicing when a society makes a change that rectifies an injustice in their lives? My hope is that during upcoming courses, my students and I, along with the characters, will be able to hear future wedding bells as writers give us new books with GLBTQ themes!

### A Reading Revolution

**Bill Broz**

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Kate's teaching assignment is a study in contrasts. The setting, serene—the redwoods near La Honda, California. Her students, troubled—mandated by the courts to a lock-down "boys camp." Kate's veteran teaching practice, dynamic and inventive—able to catch the boys' interest; conversely, it seems, unable to reach a fundamental goal—students' sustained focus to read whole books independently. The revolution arrives

in two boxes, gifts from two young adult authors and their publishers. From Ben Saenz: five copies each of *Sammy and Juliana in Hollywood*, *Last Night I Sang to the Monster*, *He Forgot to Say Good-Bye*. From Matt de la Peña: copies of *Ball Don't Lie*, *Mexican White Boy*, *We Were Here*. Books about Zack and Sticky—boys in “the system.” Or Miguel in *We Were Here*—from San José, adjudicated perhaps in the same courtroom where Kate’s students were adjudicated, sent to a facility like theirs—Miguel “on the run” down the coast passing just a few miles from their facility.

What Kate sees:

“I watch boys who have never read a book being absorbed in the stories. And then the cascade effect. One boy finishes a book and then recommends it to another. The books start being passed around. Boys are asking me daily if I can recommend a book for them. They finish Matt’s books, which arrive first, and move on to Ben’s. The discussions ensue; one day, we talk about survivor guilt. I explain the concept, then the boys start teaching me. Many have seen friends and/or family members shot, and they wonder why they made it. The ties to the books seem very strong.”

What Kate hears:

Boys make statements like, “I enjoyed the book because it is a great struggle. I can relate to the character’s emotions and thinking.” “When I am reading a page, I just can’t wait to move on to the others.” The books “describe how the juvenile justice system works.” “I feel like I am in the shoes of the main character.” “It is like being one with the book.”

Can’t stop the revolution:

Kate has to be out for a few days. One boy asks the substitute teacher if he can take the book back to his dorm to read. Incorrectly, the sub says, “No.” Upon Kate’s return, she hears about this incident and on a hunch asks the boy if he took the book anyway, despite the potential stiff consequences. He tells her, “Yes.” Kate tells him that it is a great reading moment. He hasn’t stopped reading since.

Students in such facilities deserve to be offered good books that they can and will read, books that reflect their lives, books that offer a glimpse of a better future.

## Late Library Book

### Brian Schmitt

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It happened again. A teacher shared information about a course he was taking on young adult literature and requested some additional books for the classroom library. I asked him for some recommendations, and he said he enjoyed *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins. This occurred in August; I ordered the books for his library and filed the conversation in the back of my mind.

In October, a student told me she was excited about the movie based on *The Hunger Games*. She encouraged me to read the novel, so I picked up a copy from the school library. I couldn’t put the book down and learned of the trilogy. I quickly spoke with our library aide and asked for the second book of the trilogy, *Catching Fire* (2009). She called me and stated that the book was not available and a week overdue. I asked the name of the student who had the book.

You can imagine the look on the student’s face when she walked in my office. I asked her if she had *Catching Fire* and she responded, “Yes.” When asked if she knew her book was overdue, she questioned, “Did you call me to the principal’s office because you want to read my library book?” We laughed, I smiled and said, “Go back to the library, resign the book out, and finish it because I want to read it!”

The library aide called laughing and couldn’t believe I called a student to the office for having a late library book. The librarian brought in personal copies of the second and third books in the trilogy. I shared the story repeatedly and everyone agreed, don’t tell the principal the name of a good book or you might get called to his office to talk about it.