

LGBTQ+ Stories

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Announcer 2: Okay, let's get on it.

Ashleigh Yates: Most of all Morris likes the dress-up centre and the tangerine dress. Morris likes the colour of the dress; it reminds him of tigers, the sun and his mother's hair. He likes the noises the dress makes; swish, swish, swish, when he walks and crinkle, crinkle, crinkle, when he sits down. He takes turns wearing all the different shoes but his most favourite ones go click, click, click, across the floor.

Interviewer (Jaime Orr) : Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress from Canadian publisher Groundwood Books written by Christine Baldacchino and illustrated by Isabelle Malenfant tells the story of a little boy who loves using his imagination. Morris represent vulnerability and the courage it takes to be different. This story offers children a different kind of adventure tale, one that is focused less on knights and dragons and saving princesses and more on breaking gender conventions. Books are opportunities for children to reflect on their own lives as well as learn about others. In public libraries, how often do children come across these stories that may challenge or simply offer a new way of thinking about the world around them.

My name is Jamie Orr and I recently sat down with Alyssa Duke, Melissa Martin, Danielle Betteridge and Ashley Yeats-McKay, fellow MLIS grad students, to talk about their research project which asks the question, to what extent are children's picture books containing LGBTQ+ representations being included in the collections of Ontario public libraries.

Alyssa Martin: We've compiled a list of the most recommended rainbow picture books and were checking to see how many of them Ontario's public libraries have. We're also collecting information on some factors that we thought might influence how many of these books are in the collections. So, some of those factors are the median total household income, the political leanings and we're looking at those over the last three election periods. We're looking at library budgets and not just library budgets but how those break down, and we're looking at the population size of the areas that contain those libraries.

Danielle Bettridge: The average number of titles that a library held right now was about 25 to 26%, so very low. I mean ultimately I think when you look at our numbers, we might be surprised that these books are not necessarily already in the collection. This isn't meant to be, you know, some negative calling out of those libraries that are maybe not as diverse as we would like but that it's just hopefully going to bring that sense of awareness where they're going to look at their own collections in the same way that Alyssa and I have both spoken about how we noticed our collections and we wanted to maybe change it a little. Just if we're helping bring attention to it, if people are going to take that pause and read our research and think "Hmm, I should look at what we have to offer and maybe make some changes" then that's kind of what we're hoping for I guess.

Ashleigh Yates: On Monday, Becky tried to pull the dress right off his back. "You can't wear it, you're a boy." On Tuesday, Eli, Henry and the other boys wouldn't let Morris ride on their spaceship unless he took off the dress. "Astronauts don't wear dresses."

Alyssa Martin: There's been a lot of research about how seeing different people in the media offers – the consumers have said media – windows and doors, and the door is the ability to look at some media and see your own life in front of you. And it's a validating experience and it allows the person who's watching a movie or reading that book to see themselves and it gives them role models. It gives positive representation which is why it's so important not just to have token characters on the screen but characters that are real people, complex people with their own thoughts and emotions and a vast array of types of people. The other thing that was important was the windows and that's where people have the opportunity to look into someone else's life and to realize that not everybody thinks the same way and not everyone lives the same way but that's not a reason that everyone isn't deserving and worthy of respect. It's a lot harder to unteach lessons of bigotry or even just simple misunderstandings.

So, if we can reach kids before, you know, they've learned those ingrained patterns that might be hurtful to people, I think that that's just a huge step in the right direction. It would be really great if our library collections could offer more windows and more doors and I think that's, in the end, what we're hoping that this project accomplishes. And not just for LGBTQ picture books but really diversity in every capacity.

Ashleigh Yates: On Friday, Morris pretended he had a tummy ache. When he thought of all the kids in his class and all the mean things they did and said, his tummy ached for real.

Jaime Orr: Over the weekend Morris spent some time with his mother and his cat Meow. They made puzzles, they read books and Morris painted a painting. He used his imagination and he painted an elephant in space.

Ashleigh Yates: "And who's that?" his mother asked pointing at the little boy in the tangerine dress riding atop the big blue elephant. Morris was hoping she'd ask. "That's me" he said.

Alissa Droog: One of the first things we did after we compiled the list was we read the books. We read about 80 to 100 books with LGBTQ+ themes and there were a variety of things we noticed. First animals – there’s a lot of books that do feature animals and the problem with that is that you can kind of soften the tone of the actual LGBTQ+ content if you’re using animals and not people. You’re not showing them as real people if they’re animals. That’s one of the issues. There is also a number of books that don’t – we call them books with double meaning and we tracked a number of them. For example, *Red: A Crayon’s Story* talks about a crayon for the entire time but the crayon is transgender and you don’t necessarily realize it. I read the book to my roommate and she said “I don’t understand how this fits into your research.” And I told her and she was like “Oh like totally – some of these books have double meanings and you don’t necessarily get it unless you know.

Alyssa Martin: It’s a metaphor.

Alissa Droog: Yeah.

Danielle Bettridge: We’re starting to see children’s picture books where the child has two dads and that’s a piece of the story in the same way that other stories say my mom and my dad and it goes about the story about penguins on a magical journey. It’s a piece, you know. “I have two dads and they helped me get ready for my birthday party.” But the story isn’t about just the fact that I have two dads, it’s about my birthday party and the fun that I’m going to have and it’s a piece of the story book and I think that seeing things like that are also great as well.

Danielle Bettridge: Partridge I think something – and I can’t speak to author – but I think something’s that really interesting with *Red: A Crayon’s Story*, and other books that maybe have more subtle tones, is that part of what made the book popular is the community has taken it and taken ownership over it. Whether or not every person is going to pick it up and realize that this can be interpreted as a story about a transgender crayon, maybe doesn’t matter so much as the fact that it’s there and the LGBTQ+ community has said “This is the story and I can use it in this way.” It’s a high value book that’s gotten a lot of attention I would say.

Alyssa Martin: And we don’t want to knock these books. There’s nothing wrong with these books.

Danielle Bettridge: Yeah, absolutely.

Alyssa Martin: Sometimes it’s great to have that metaphor or to have a book that can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. The problem is when they’re the only books that exist and when they’re the only voice because it’s not exactly a voice. Like it’s great but –

Danielle Bettridge: It’s great but we want more.

Alyssa Martin: Yeah.

Danielle Bettridge: And I think that's the baseline is that it's a great story, we love it, but we want more. We want more representation, we want, you know, we want to see everyone represented.

Alyssa Martin: 100%. There are issues with the books that we do have. In my particular opinion, I think that the art for a lot of these books could use a lot of work. I don't want to knock them too bad because they went there and they were doing something that no-body else was doing and I can't give them enough props for that. But the production quality for a lot of these books just is not on par with the production quality of a lot of other books that big publishing houses are making and it would be really nice to see these voices getting the same amplification that a lot of other voices are getting.

Ashleigh Yates: Eli and Henry wouldn't let him on their spaceship so Morris built his own. He hung his painting on the front of it and climbed in, ready to take off. "Are there really elephants in space?" Eli asked, "And tigers?" "If you follow me, we can find out" Morris offered. Eli and Henry followed Morris to a planet that they had never visited before. As they explored Morris swish, swish, swished. The tangerine dress crinkle, crinkle, crinkled. His shoes clicked, clicked, clicked.

Alyssa Martin: And it will help all those kids out there who are LGBTQ but also all those other kids who are just going to end up being allies.

Danielle Bettridge: I think we're looking at the impact on this next generation and if we're able to help influence – if we're able to help bring these books, if we're able to help make these topics accessible to this new generation of kids – and you have to think about this like we're talking about children's picture books. These are those base storybooks that, you know, most kids are growing up looking at and reading, and if we're able to offer them these things at that young age, I think that it's going to really – it's going to bring about an amazing amount of change and empathy and just understanding that we're going to see when these kids today become adults.

Alissa Droog: We're hoping to publish our results. We'd like to write possibly in a professional publication as well as an academic publication. The professional one will be for library practitioners with some guidance on how can you actually diversify your collection and also the academic one will be about, you know, our methodology; how did we actually go about doing this and why did we make the decisions that we did.

Alyssa Martin: I think in that professional publication as well, we want to give some guidelines on just a couple of things to think about when you're looking at books. There are a lot of tropes out there and there are a lot of stories that have been told and they've been told very well and they've been told many, many, many times and there's a lot of other stories that aren't seeing that same representation. So there's a lot of stories about gay families, there's a lot of stories about lesbian families but we're not seeing a lot of stories about gender queer individuals or trans individuals. I think that's changing but we just want to like get people to like really analyse their whole collection and realize that just because this is an umbrella term doesn't

mean that every story is the same story. Like there's a bunch of different stories that need to be told.

Ashleigh Yates: When snack time was over Becky demanded the dress. Morris told her she could have it when he was done with it. "Boys don't wear dresses" Becky snipped. Morris smiled as he swished, crinkled and clicked back to his spaceship. "This boy does."

Announcer 2: This has been another episode of So What?.

Announcer 1: The podcast about library and information science research and why it matters.

Announcer 2: So What? is created and produced by students at the faculty of information and media studies at Western University in London, Ontario.

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