

The Point

by William J. Mann

Linda Guida is a children's librarian in upstate New York. Standing among the shelves of books and the rows of reading tables she is, in a very real sense, in the midst of a battlefield.

"Sometimes it sure feels that way," she says. "Every time a child picks up a certain book, I worry, 'Is this going to lead to a battle?'"

Those "certain books" happen to be the Gay-themed titles. And not just any book: what worries Guida most are the Gay-themed picture books — *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate* and their ilk — the ones aimed at the youngest readers.

con. There's an ongoing battle in Kansas City, Mo., over Gay-themed children's books in school libraries, where the Lesbian-themed young adult novel *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden was actually set on fire in a public book-burning in 1993. In Rutland, Vt., last year, the public library had to ward off attempts by parents to have *Daddy's Roommate* removed from the shelves. And just last month in Anchorage, Alaska, the school board voted to keep as part of the curriculum the book *Earthshine*, which deals with a child whose father is Gay and has AIDS, after some parents had called for its removal.

"There's no question that Gay and Lesbian-themed

for homosexuals, of spreading "lies and myths about the Gay and Lesbian community."

The book, first published in 1993, tells the story of a boy who thinks he might be Gay. In the course of therapy, however, the boy realizes his attraction for other boys stem from being sexually abused by an uncle and from his father's neglect. Alfie ends up straight, even married to a woman.

Cohen, who lives in Maryland, says he believes that *Alfie's Home* presents an alternative perspective for "those who wish to change their sexual orientation."

"As a former homosexual and psy-

Shaping minds

Cultural warriors seek place on children's bookshelves



"I've had parents come to me worried about what their children are reading," she says. "It's funny how the picture books often cause the greatest stir. We had to remove *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate* for a time."

She says rather than risk a highly public controversy, the school board quickly acceded to the parents' demands to take the books off the shelves. "They didn't want a repeat of what happened in the city," she said.

"The city," in this case, is New York, where a protracted fight in 1992 over the inclusion of *Heather* and *Daddy's Roommate* in the school curriculum drew national headlines. Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez eventually lost his job over the "Rainbow Curriculum," an attempt to bring books representing a multicultural spectrum into school libraries.

The American Library Association noted a dramatic increase in reported challenges to Gay-themed books in public and school libraries after the New York City fracas, and the trend has continued unabated ever since. Some of the challenges have been successful, others have not.

The issue arouses fierce public sentiment, pro and



materials in schools will continue to be lightning rods for the right," says Deanna Duby of People for the American

Way. Duby tracks censorship issues for the liberal watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. "The right gets a ton of mileage out of these cases. Anything that mentions homosexuality in anything but a negative way can be charged with 'promoting a lifestyle.'"

Duby says that children's picture books are often the hottest issue.

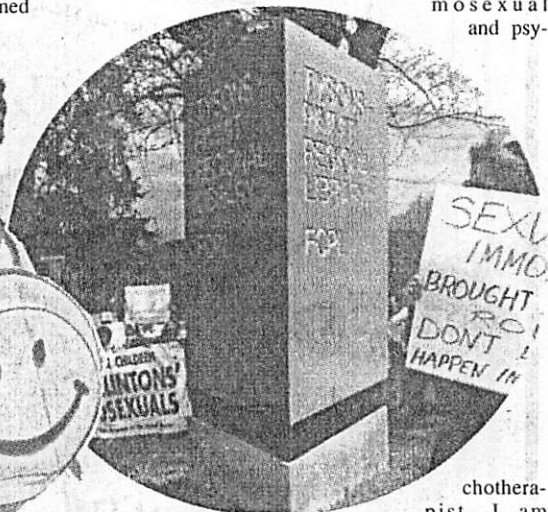
"There's always more concern the younger the children are," she says. "The right loves to charge that [such books] are 'teaching sodomy to first graders.'"

Taking the offensive

Now the tables have turned. Alan Klein, national communications director for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, says his pro-Gay advocacy group is taking a different strategy in the war over children's literature.

"This time, we're going after them," he says.

The group recently spoke out against *Alfie's Home*, a picture book by Richard Cohen, through press releases and online postings. GLAAD accused the author, Richard Cohen of the International Healing Foundation, an organization advocating "reparative therapy"



chotherapist, I am

standing up for what

I believe, and the journey that I have chosen," he says. "I respect the choice of those who wish to fulfill their homosexual desires. I would equally appreciate the reciprocal respect for my choice."

In any case, *Alfie's Home* is a first. There are no other such blatantly anti-Gay picture books aimed at children. In fact, Gay issues and characters have been treated quite favorably when they do (admittedly rarely) appear.

"I cannot think of a single trade book that has had a negative Gay character," says Roger Sutton, the editor of *The Horn Book*, an influential review of children's literature. Might then *Alfie's Home* signal a trend? GLAAD's Klein says he doesn't know, but he's cautious. "It very well might be a portent of things to come."

Shaping minds

Meanwhile, the children for whom these books are intended remain at the heart of the debate.

"The Christian radical right, for that's who really leads these protests, has the perception that we're trying to recruit children into homosexuality via these books," says Lesléa Newman, author of *Heather Has Two Mommies*. "But *Heather* isn't about the mothers' sexual orientation. It's about a little girl who views all sorts of families around her. It's absurd to think some kid is going to read *Heather* and become Gay."

Indeed, the book is more about having tolerance for *Heather*, a little girl in a special situation, than for her mommies — although there is a clear message that their family is equal to any other. It's that message — some would call it subversive — that so concerns opponents: Opinions formed at a very young age often last a lifetime.

"That's what so frightens the Christian right," says Newman, "who think we're going to influence children's minds before they have a chance to."

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children. Both children are flat, two-dimensional characters who fail to challenge stereotypes in the way the other characters do. Still, Emily Eckenrod brings additional depth to Julie's daughter, Lisa, a spoiled and well-manicured 14-year-old. And Lee Hagy manages to wring life out of the younger son's character, whose two single emotions seem to be bliss and blind rage.

In addition to Julie and Claire there is Mr. Miranda, Julie's sensitive and geeky computer science teacher and mentor. Miranda, warmly portrayed by Joseph Cronin, not only encourages Julie to get her diploma, but also helps Julie accept her

the use of a crown and white shag carpet. This production fittingly marks the 20th anniversary of Horizons, whose mission is to produce women playwrights and create opportunities for women in theater. *Julie Johnson* pays homage to the spirit of women artists who break ground every day by living out the truth of their lives and dreams. ▼

Julie Johnson runs at the Gunston Theater Two, 2700 S. Lang St. in Arlington, Va., until April 19. Tickets are \$15 and \$18. Call (703) 243-8550 for information.

Shaping young minds

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Jill Karpf, a librarian in the Montgomery County, Md., public school system, said she recently helped students research topics assigned for a debate class: the legalization of drugs, abortion, Gay marriage. One parent, getting a glimpse of the books his child brought home, complained to the teacher and got the Gay marriage assignment dropped.

"Not their kid being excused from the debate, mind you," Karpf says, "but the whole Gay marriage debate dropped."

Picture books, she says, raise even more hackles. A few years ago, after a parent complained, Karpf's school district forbade children under the fifth grade from seeing the book *Families*, which had won an award from the National Council of Social Workers.

"It's a wonderful book, with pictures of all kinds of families, including a Gay and a Lesbian family," she says. "But the county school district ruled it couldn't be distributed, couldn't even be shown to the younger children. Which was a real problem, since it was meant for younger kids."

She recalls that, during the controversy, one of the book's opponents was quoted in the media as saying, "These people are trying to get our children to think."

Karpf laughs. "Which is right," she says. "Isn't that the job of the school?"

Not everyone agrees on just what "the job of the school" should be. According to

those who have led the fight against Gay-themed picture books in the nation's libraries (both school and public), such titles proselytize, teaching children values their parents would rather they not have.

"The whole curriculum is a smoke screen for promoting homosexuality," said Erin Harte of Concerned Parents of Educational Accountability, one of the many "ad hoc" groups that responded to New York's Rainbow Curriculum. "It plants the seed early [that] children can either marry a man or marry a woman."

Guida says she was able to quietly replace *Heather* and *Daddy's Roommate* on the shelves of her public library after the furor in her town died down. Likewise, *Families* is now available again to younger readers in Karpf's library; the county school district's ruling was in effect for only three years.

"You have to weigh the needs of your community," Guida says. "We have more and more children now with Lesbian parents. We have to meet their needs."

Newman concurs. "The whole reason I originally wrote *Heather* was because I recognized there was this need. There is still a glaring omission of books on families other than those with one mother, one father, sisters and brothers." She has helped correct that omission, following *Heather* with several other children's books, including *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*. Michael Willhoite, author of *Daddy's Roommate*, has also penned other



Richard Cohen, author of the picture book *Alfie's Home*, says he is presenting an alternative viewpoint for "those who wish to change their sexual orientation."


Gay-positive children's titles, including *Daddy's Wedding* and *Uncle What-Is-It Is Coming to Visit!!*

Bottom line

While the number of Gay-themed young adult books has risen steadily, the number of picture books has remained fairly static, in part perhaps because of the controversy. There are other reasons, of course, having to do less with content and more with the bottom line. Just who

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Shaping young minds

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are the children who read these books, and how many are there?

David Gale, senior editor for books for young readers at Simon & Schuster, says it's hard to know what kinds of numbers Gay picture books really have.

"Everything's skewed," he says, pointing out the fact that so many Gay-themed picture books come from small presses with smaller print runs. "It's hard to say what the market [for these books] is. There is a growing number of Gay and Lesbian parents, to be sure, and there are always those liberal parents who want their children to read about diverse families. But to get the numbers up to a point where a publisher will want to go with it — that's a long way off."

As a result, there are precious few Gay-themed picture books, almost all published by the Gay small press Alyson, which put out *Heather, Daddy's Roommate*, *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, *Daddy's Wedding*, *Uncle What-Is-It is Coming to Visit!!*, and others. Newman published *Too Far Away to Touch* with the mainstream house Clarion last year, but that's the exception — and the book's Gay characters were not explicit.

A Question of Quality

Sutton, of *The Horn Book*, points out that among the recent surge in Gay-themed older children and young adult books, he's seen some "stunning" writing. Karpf, the Maryland librarian, says the work of such writers as Nancy Garden and Jacqueline Woodson are "good literature first," and then "good Lesbian-themed books."

Such is not the case, many believe, with Gay-themed picture books.

"These books tend toward the didactic," says Sutton. "Often when people write about social themes for children they end up being preachy. I've said that *Daddy's Roommate* is more for Daddy than for Junior."

"There are so few good picture books," says Simon & Schuster's David Gale. "So many are there just to teach a lesson or make a statement."

"More and more," says Elizabeth Ford, an associate professor of English at Westminister College in New Wilmington, Pa., "children's literature is being seen as a prescription to medicate children for some particular issue."

With such a small number of Gay-themed titles to choose from, librarians are left with few options.

Karpf says she could not recommend *Heather Has Two Mommies* to her school district. Though it's perhaps the best known of the children's titles, Karpf says "it's just not good literature." Instead she offers *Asha's Two Mums* by Elwin Rosamund, from an even smaller publisher: Women's Press of Toronto.

"I will not put a book on the shelf if it is merely didactic or of poor quality," says Karpf. "I don't care what it is."

Many librarians make choices based on the recommendations of *Booklist*, a publication of the American Library Association. The magazine has been friendly to Gay-themed children's books — it

gave good reviews to *Heather* and another Newman book, *Saturday is Patty Day* — but it's picky about giving out starred reviews.

"Quality counts for them," says Karpf, who adds that if *Booklist* stars a particular review, she'll usually order the book.

Families is one of the very few picture books with any Gay content that has been starred by *Booklist*. So far, *Alfie's Home* has not been reviewed.

Ultimately, as Guida points out, it's really up to the librarian which books get placed on the shelves, meaning they not only wield considerable power but also important responsibility.

Conservative critics might agree with the assessment of the didacticism of Gay-themed children's literature. But *Alfie's Home*, too, exists primarily to make its point and send a message.

Literature professor Ford asks where, then, are the picture books that address the complex, nuanced realities of Gay life?

"Shouldn't books be less specifically about the condition and more about the character?" she asks.

In particular, she cites the lack of real exploration of gender issues in the existing Gay-themed picture books. Among the real-life themes for both Gay children and Gay parents is "gender confusion" — a girl who acts like a tomboy and is ostracized by her friends, a boy who's called a sissy, a mom who's very butch, or a dad who's effeminate.

"There's a necessity of distance," she says. "Distancing the reader from a threatening [sexually ambiguous] situation."

So far, such themes haven't been covered by picture books. Though Guida feels that such titles as *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate* essentially are simple, safe, didactic books, she acknowledges that these titles serve a very real purpose. "Gay children's books are the needles in the haystacks of all the rest," she says. "Sometimes you can't even get them in bookstores. That's why I keep them on the shelves."

The one Gay-themed picture book she says she'll never order, however, is *Uncle What-Is-It Is Coming to Visit!!* In this, a boy and girl are fearful that their Gay uncle will turn out to be a drag queen or leather man. When he turns out to be Joe Average, they're relieved. "What kind of message is that?" Guida asks. "If you ask me, that's as harmful as *Alfie's Home*."

Still, she says, "There is always going to be criticism within the Lesbian and Gay community about which books are the most appropriate for children. There needs to be an ongoing discussion."

That discussion will surely continue for some time. As each new battle is resolved, one way or another, another one appears. Of course, as Newman points out, the controversy over *Heather Has Two Mommies* and the others has had a beneficial kickback.

"It certainly made the book much more visible and known that it was," she says, noting the book's increased sales and placements throughout the country. Likewise, the same controversy could help *Alfie's Home* now, and other books that may come along like it. ▼