Collecting to the Core: GLBTI Memoirs

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Collecting to the Core — GLBTI Memoirs

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Humanity has a strong impulse towards storytelling and one of the most commonly told stories is that of a life. Plutarch promoted personal stories as “a sort of looking-glass in which [we] may see how to adjust and adorn [our lives].” Readers looking for examples have many memoirs from which to choose. Indeed, genre growth has been explosive; Bowker reported a 108 percent increase in biographical works between 2002 and 2011. While the growth is encouraging, the numbers reveal very little about the genre. For example: how many memoirs are about African Americans? Authors? Business persons? Gays and lesbians? Women? If, as tatiana de la tierra asserts, people enter libraries looking for themselves, to see their culture and community reflected in literature, then memoirs are central to collection development. In academic libraries, this centrality is augmented by the need to support the curriculum, and memoirs can serve as useful interdisciplinary educational tools, documenting history, providing personal narratives that give insight into social events, and facilitating identity and self-discovery. Librarians seeking to enhance biographical collections could benefit from more detailed information about the genre. Subject cataloging assists genre analysis and provides more detailed information about the genre. As edited works, the quality of anthologies may be uneven, but this should be overlooked in favor of collecting a diversity of content depicting this important ritual. Early efforts were devoted to a single gender, such as Stanley and Wolfe’s, *The Coming Out Stories* and *Curtis’s Revelations: A Collection of Gay Male Coming Out Stories.* A notable exception, *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives,* by Nancy and Casey Adair, began as a documentary film and featured both men and women at a time when gender-inclusive works were few. Authors writing coming out stories in *Patrick Merla’s Lambda Award* finalist *Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories,* which remains one of the few titles addressing coming out as bisexual. While many books contain coming out stories, anthologies solely devoted to the topic for people of color are nearly nonexistent. The African American GLBTI community is the exception; readers will find role models in *Lisa Moore’s Does Your Mama Know?: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories* and the Stonewall Award-winning *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Still Not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, and Coming Home,* edited by Keith Boykin.

The transgender community has also documented the experience of coming out as trans. Historically significant is *Christine Jorgensen’s* 1967 Lambda Award-winning *Gender Outlaw,* which first appeared in the subject authority file in 1990. Due to the quantity of coming out memoirs, anthologies are an expedient collection development tool. As edited works, the quality of anthologies may be uneven, but this should be overlooked in favor of collecting a diversity of content depicting this important ritual. Early efforts were devoted to a single gender, such as *Stanley and Wolfe’s, The Coming Out Stories* and *Curtis’s Revelations: A Collection of Gay Male Coming Out Stories.* A notable exception, *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives,* by Nancy and Casey Adair, began as a documentary film and featured both men and women at a time when gender-inclusive works were few. Authors writing coming out stories in *Patrick Merla’s Lambda Award* finalist *Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories,* which remains one of the few titles addressing coming out as bisexual. While many books contain coming out stories, anthologies solely devoted to the topic for people of color are nearly nonexistent. The African American GLBTI community is the exception; readers will find role models in *Lisa Moore’s Does Your Mama Know?: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories* and the Stonewall Award-winning *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Still Not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, and Coming Home,* edited by Keith Boykin.

The transgender community has also documented the experience of coming out as trans. Historically significant is *Christine Jorgensen’s* 1967 Lambda Award-winning *Gender Outlaw,* which moved beyond chronicling a psychological and medical experience toward cultural criticism and a demand for acceptance. Female to male trans Loren Cameron paired this theme with photographs in his double *Lambda Award-*winning *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits.* Authors shared commentary, art, and essays from a new generation of transsexuals are found in *Bornstein’s sequel Gender Outlaw: The Next Generation.*

Another group produced an unenviable body of work in the form of the AIDS memoir. *G. Thomas Couser* asserts how the “specter of AIDS overshadowed virtually every personal account authored by [gay] men.” In addition to relaying a personal story, this format continued on page 71.
also gave authors the opportunity to rage at a society demonizing the afflicted and to excise past ghosts and facilitate reconciliations before death. Paul Monette’s canon, beginning with the multiple award-winning Borrowed Time, belongs in all libraries.21 Borrowed Time is a deeply intimate love story chronicling the HIV-infected author’s two years caring for his partner; later works memorialize lovers and recount Monette’s health struggle and impending death. Artist David Wojnarowicz worked on a graphical biography prior to his death, depicting his gritty life on the street as a prostitute and anger against homophobia through watercolor illustrations in the first graphic novel to address AIDS, 7 Miles a Second.22 Heaven’s Coast, a finalist for the Lambda and Stonewall Awards, is poet Mark Doty’s lyrical memoir of his partner’s death, a topic which he revisited, along with the company of a canine companion, in his Stonewall Award-winning Dog Years.23-24

Librarians seeking to balance the collection by including AIDS memoirs by or about people of color will encounter difficulties. Typically, these stories are located within other works, such as a single author’s collection of essays or poems, as exemplified in Essex Hemphill’s Stonewall Award-winning Ceremonies: Prose and Poems, and anthologies such as the ground-breaking Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS, the first anthology devoted entirely to African American AIDS writing.25-26 The Stonewall Honor Book Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned, by Judd Winick, is the story of friendship between a Jewish cartoonist and a Cuban American AIDS educator who meet while appearing on reality TV.27 The story’s distinctive origins and the Latino protagonist qualify this title for inclusion in GLBTI collections.

The place of graphic novels in an academic library is sometimes questioned, but the increasing availability of nonfiction graphic works circumvents the debate. In the category of GLBTI graphic memoirs Alison Bechdel is well regarded. Her 2006 work, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, sets a high standard.28 The expressive, detailed art and literate prose details Bechdel’s relationship with her father. The accolades afforded Fun Home — Lambda, Stonewall, and Publishing Triangle awards, New York Times bestseller — and its appeal to a wide audience justify including this and other works by Bechdel in any collection.

Mia Wolff’s artistic renditions relate the story of science fiction writer Samuel Delany’s interrelated relationship in Bread and Wine: An Erotic Tale of New York.29 As an early effort in this category and one of the few featuring a person of color, this title is a unique contribution to collections. Dylan Edwards’ pushing the definition of memoir by combining or slightly altering the life stories of six female to male transsexuals in Transposes, a Lambda Award finalist.30 Edwards’ artistic liberties should be forgiven and the title included in collections due to the paucity of graphic memoirs featuring trans people.

Once stigmatized by society, the present state of GLBTI memoirs is encouraging; reviews, awards, subject headings, and the 2009 implementation of a BISAC (Book Industry Standards and Communications) code specific to GLBTI memoirs — Biography & Autobiography / Gay & Lesbian — are all indicators of the genre’s growth and maturity. While the titles selected here were intentionally chosen to represent the GLBTI community’s diversity, the availability of biographical and autobiographical works is sufficient to warrant recommendations in ever-narrowing areas such as politics, military, sports, entertainment, health, or education. Beyond the prevalent narratives chronicling coming out and AIDS, memoirs exploring other issues related to GLBTI life are emerging, as well as “incidental” memoirs in which the subject’s sexuality is not the story’s primary focus. By providing readers with what Philip Lopate called “a reward in the form of a shiver of self recognition,” GLBTI memoirs become teaching tools transcending time, place, and culture to aid in personal development and preserve social history.31

Endnotes

20. Couser, G. Thomas. Southwest Review. 81.3 (Summer 1996), 404.

*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.