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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 attiana 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 discovery, but cataloging has limitations, particularly for historically marginalized groups such as the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (GLBTI) community. For example, television personality Ellen DeGeneres is a well-known lesbian, yet the Cataloging in Publication record omits this information from her recent memoir Seriously — I’m Kidding, and omissions like this hinder the identification of GLBTI memoirs. This essay offers a partial remedy to the difficulty of locating GLBTI memoirs by suggesting important titles for an academic collection and exploring these works within the context of personal identity.

Prior to the gay liberation movement, dedicated GLBTI biographies or memoirs were virtually nonexistent. The tide turned with Jane Rule’s 1975 work Lesbian Images, which focuses on the lives and works of lesbian authors. Rule was concerned with “…exploring…writing in relation to personal experience and the discovery[ of] what images of lesbians women writers have projected in fiction, biography, and autobiography.” As a study of lesbian identity and character, Lesbian Images remains a significant work. Replicating Rule’s approach, David Bergman’s Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature examines the works of gay men in an effort to create a “gay genealogy of representation.” He asserts that gay self-representation is heavily influenced by a sense of otherness, of being an outsider, and an urgent need to be understood. Bergman’s conclusions are notable for providing another powerful raison d’être for GLBTI memoir, specifically to preserve individual identity in a community historically lacking a traditional familial structure by which memories are passed between generations.

Rule’s and Bergman’s foundational efforts focused widely on examinations of authors and texts for representations of personal identity. Inevitably, personal narratives were analyzed using varying theoretical approaches, predominately gender theory, and monographs became narrower in scope. Jeanne Perrault recast memoir within the context of feminism in Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autobiography. Reading the “textual configurations of subjectivity,” Perrault demonstrated the reciprocal influences of self and community, concluding that personal narratives can be political acts. Bertram Cohler explored socio-cultural influences on the writings of twentieth-century gay males in Writing Desire: Sixty Years of Gay Autobiography. Dividing the writings by decade, Cohler, a psychoanalyst, identified the psychological impact on personal identity of the classification and declassification (in 1973) of homosexuality as a mental disorder. He observed that autobiographical works penned by authors coming of age before the declassification reflected self-loathing, a struggle for self-acceptance, and a sense of disconnectedness. Conversely, the works of later authors were more open and personal, demonstrating individuals within larger societal roles, such as members of families and communities. Cohler’s text was notable for considering the role of Internet-based self-writing as a safe space to work out personal identity before revealing same-sex desires in face-to-face interactions.

Openly sharing same-sex desires, or “coming out,” has resulted in a large body of memoirs. This type of memoir is clearly unique to the GLBTI community, and the coming out narrative is particularly powerful due to its personal nature and multiple purposes: reassuring and supporting individuals in the process of self-discovery as well as contributing to a larger sense of community. Coming out is a significant enough trope to require a Library of Congress subject heading — Coming out (Sexual orientation) — 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 vary, 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 sharing 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 self-titled memoir, which remains one of the few titles addressing coming out as trans and the specter of AIDS overshadowed virtually every personal account authored by [gay] men. In addition to relaying a personal story, this format contained 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 graphic 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 an extremely 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 renderings relate the story of science fiction writer Samuel Delany’s intersexual 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 pushes 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 stifled 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.