



The 2014 Rainbow List: A Descriptive Study of the List and Ten Public Libraries' Ownership

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Abstract

Are libraries purchasing adequate materials for their youth LGBTQ collections? This study compares the ownership of the 2014 Rainbow Book List (RBL) titles to a list created from the top ten titles of Best Fiction for Young Adults (BFYA), the Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (QP), and the Teens' Top Ten (TTT) in the public libraries from the top ten largest cities in the United States. It also reports on the balance of the 2014 RBL list in regards to target audience, diversity in types of fiction, nonfiction, and theme. In general, libraries owned fewer copies of RBL titles than those on the comparison list.

Introduction

As LGBTQ issues command a more permanent position within the mainstream cultural discourse, determining the dimensions of this historically marginalized population becomes increasingly imperative. To accomplish this task, Gates examined the findings of eleven U.S. and international surveys that reported on sexual orientation or gender identity. This research concluded that an estimated 3.5% adults in the United States identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, even though approximately 8.2% of Americans reported participating in

same-sex behaviors.ⁱ Survey methodology and terminology certainly affect the way in which people answer questions, and this phenomenon may be intensified in the case of self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) when disclosing such personal information can have severe consequences.ⁱⁱ However, one valuable insight to come out of *A Survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences and Values in Changing Times* by the Pew Research Center that is applicable to librarians working with youth is that the majority of LGBT adults became certain of their sexual identity between the ages of ten and nineteen. The survey found that the median age at which lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults first began contemplating their sexual status as heterosexual or straight is twelve, whereas the definitive recognition of their sexual identity as a member of the LGBTQ community materialized at a median age of seventeen.ⁱⁱⁱ If youth are questioning at twelve, then young adult librarians are uniquely positioned to provide them with materials that can offer insight, reflection, and comfort that they are not alone in their questioning or experience.

The mission of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) is “to expand and strengthen library services for teens, aged 12–18.”^{iv} One way that YALSA expresses its mission is through its many booklists (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/bookawards/booklists/members>) that support the selection of award-winning titles and facilitate effective and meaningful collection development. While many of these lists highlight excellent LGBTQ titles, that is not their focus or intent. It was the birth of the Rainbow Book List (<http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>) in 2008 by the Rainbow Book List Committee of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table that provided librarians with valuable information to assist teens with identifying materials that explore the LGBTQ perspectives. This list is an annual “bibliography of quality books with significant and authentic GLBTQ content, which are recommended for people from birth through eighteen years of age.”^v

This study will present descriptive statistics for the 2014 Rainbow Book List (RBL) and its ownership by public libraries in the ten largest cities in the United States. Additionally, it will compare the ownership of RBL titles to selected titles from a comparison list comprised of titles from three other book lists, including the Best Fiction for Young Adults (BFYA),^{vi} the Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (QP)^{vii}, and the Teens’ Top Ten (TTT),^{viii} in an effort to examine the potential disparities that exist between ownership of items on conventional top ten lists and ownership of RBL titles.

Literature Review

Many articles have been written on LGBTQ resources for teens, but they most often focus on a selection of titles with annotations, content analysis of selected titles, or ways for libraries to provide services to this group.^{ix} There are fewer studies that delve into analysis of the makeup of LGBTQ booklists and public libraries' ownership and treatment of the titles on these lists. As a result, this study will explore the composition of the RBL and its application in public libraries. Literature surrounding the availability of LGBTQ resources in both public libraries and school libraries, as well as research analyzing the characteristics of non-LGBTQ booklists, will be critically examined.

Teen LGBTQ Resources in Public Libraries

Access to LGBTQ resources in public libraries can vary drastically. In an investigation of Indiana's county public library system, researchers revealed that the collections were lacking in LGBTQ subjects and that many books had been categorized as adult, making them harder for teens to access.^x Similarly, Stringer-Stanback found that in the public libraries of the four most populous counties in each of five selected states—Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia—collection size was impacted by diversity, with more demographically diverse counties having more LGBTQ materials.^{xi} A look at nine Canadian libraries revealed that LGBTQ books were less likely to be reviewed and less likely to be owned by the libraries than a selected list of non-LGBTQ fiction for teens.^{xii} In 1999 Spence compared nineteen urban public libraries in Canada and the United States and found that although American libraries held more titles from the list and more copies per capita, overall there was great variation in the percentage of titles and number of copies of listed books held across all libraries.^{xiii} A more recent study from 2017 examined twenty-four public libraries from six geographic areas—Northwest, Southwest, North-Central, South-Central, Northeast, and Southeast—to compare ownership of eighty LGBTQ titles. The checklist of eighty titles was created using the RBL, Stonewall Awards, and researcher selection. Ownership by population size—excluding metropolises with over one million inhabitants—and material type (print, ebook, CD, and downloadable) were reported. The study showed that “libraries serving populations greater than 300,000 held the most titles on the list,” whereas “libraries serving populations fewer than 20,000 had the largest ratio of copies per population of the books.” In the South-Central region (Oklahoma, Texas,

Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi), the selected libraries owned the least number of books in any format, while the Northeast region (Maine, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey) libraries held the most.^{xiv} Together these studies highlight the discrepancies that exist within the LGBTQ holdings of one library to another. The ability to access LGBTQ resources can be inconsistent and unreliable, suggesting that there is a need to incorporate the use of a LGBTQ core collection to aid in collection development practices that are both equitable and dependable.

YA LGBTQ Resources in School Libraries

As public libraries struggle to maintain access to a consistent and balanced offering of LGBTQ resources, school libraries also offer limited access to LGBTQ materials. A study of Ohio's public high schools found that there were fewer LGBTQ materials in high school library collections than other controversial materials from a list of challenged—but not LGBTQ themed—material.^{xv} A similar study of one southern U.S. state examined the collections of 125 high schools for inclusion of twenty-one LGBTQ titles recommended as core collection materials. The study reported that the schools' collections did not adequately represent the “estimated 5.9 percent of students in American high schools” since the “average number of LGBTQ-themed titles held by these school libraries was 0.4 percent.”^{xvi} In a comparison of schools in two very different U.S. states, one in the Northeast and one in the South, Oltmann found that in one state larger schools held more titles than smaller schools, but that the average holdings between states did not really differ.^{xvii} As this research indicates, both public libraries and school libraries under-collect LGBTQ resources. The lack of ownership and inclusion of these materials reveals the need for young adult librarians to reevaluate their approach to collection development and make strides for more inclusive practices that address the needs and interests of all segments of society.

YA LGBTQ Resources in the Lists

While public and school librarians must redirect their own collection development policies and practices, it is also important to acknowledge the active role that booklists play in determining what items are eventually included in a collection. If LGBTQ resources are underrepresented on booklists that librarians regularly reference and rely on to influence collection development, it stands to reason that LGBTQ resources will be inadequately represented in collections.

Benedikt's 1999 study reviewed five years of the Young Adult Library Service Association's (YALSA) Best Books for Young Adults—now called Best Fiction for Young Adults—to examine the diversity of content and the ethnicity and gender of the authors.^{xviii} From 1994 to 1998, there were 266 fiction books on the lists; only eight books were determined by Benedikt to deal with homosexuality. In a related study, Koss and Teale created a “representative sample” of 59 titles that included a selection of books from the Printz Award, Best Books for Young Adults, and Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults, and they found that LGBTQ themes were represented in just six of the books.^{xix} In an investigation of 248 titles, Rawson found that

LGBT protagonists were underrepresented within the bestsellers category, where all one hundred and thirty-six coded protagonists were identified as straight or as having no romantic preference within the novel. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual protagonists were found among the award-winning and Teens' Top Ten titles, where their prevalence was similar to actual U.S. demographics among teens.^{xx}

Given this research, librarians who serve teens should expand their use of booklists that have the propensity to neglect LGBTQ themes and instead identify other reading lists that offer more diverse perspectives and more accurately reflect the increasing diversity of young adult populations.

Research Questions

The following research questions governed the development of this study, serving as a framework for the investigation of its outcomes:

1. What does the makeup of the 2014 RBL look like?
 - a. How frequently are the following categories represented on the 2014 RBL: Gay, Bisexual, Lesbian, Transgender, and Multiple?
 - b. What is the breakdown of the list by age designation?
 - c. How much of the list is designated as fiction, nonfiction, or graphic novel?
2. How are the 2014 RBL titles treated in the selected public libraries?
 - a. To what classification (Adult, Juvenile, YA, or YA/Adult) are the 2014 RBL titles assigned in the public library's catalog?
 - b. Are some categories of the 2014 RBL less represented in the collections of the ten libraries?

3. Which titles on the 2014 RBL have the most and least copies available?
4. How does ownership and classification of the 2014 RBL titles compare to ownership of selected titles from three top ten lists?

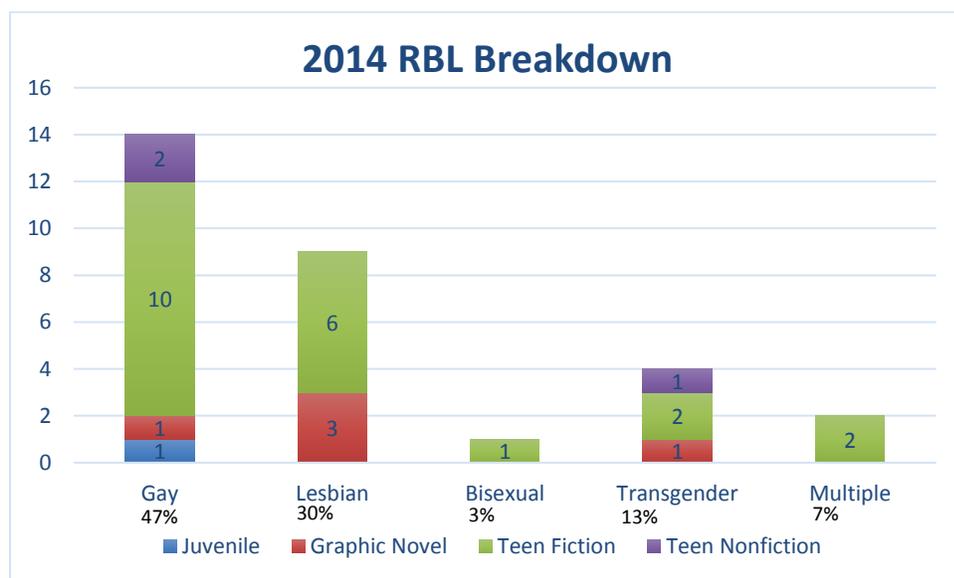
Methods

The American Library Association (ALA) sponsors two LGBTQ reading lists—the Rainbow Book List (RBL)^{xxi} for youth and Over the Rainbow Books^{xxii} for adults—and one award, the Stonewall Book Award, which was first awarded in 1971 for books with “exceptional merit” relating to the LGBTQ experience, with a youth category titled the Mike Morgan and Larry Romans Children’s and Young Adult Literature Award.^{xxiii} Although there are many suggested reading lists on the topic of LGBTQ, this study focuses solely on ALA’s booklists, not the awards, for youth on the topic. In order to offer some comparison to how ownership of the RBL titles fare against other teen books, a comparison list was created. The comparison list contains the top ten titles for the Best Fiction for Young Adults (BFYA),^{xxiv} the Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (QP),^{xxv} and the Teens’ Top Ten (TTT).^{xxvi} The top ten lists were selected for inclusion on the comparison list because most libraries are not able to purchase the entirety of all the lists due to financial, space, and audience limitations. Consequently, some libraries are compelled to limit themselves to choosing books based solely on the recommendations of top ten lists. Lists from 2014 were used in order to ensure that libraries would have had ample time to include the titles in their collection.

Individuals who identify as LGBTQ “are members of every community” and are “diverse, come from all walks of life, and include people of all races and ethnicities, all ages, all socioeconomic statuses, and from all parts of the United States.”^{xxvii} This study looked at the public libraries of the ten largest cities in the United States in order to survey a significant portion of the country using only a handful of public library systems. Each public library’s online catalog was searched for every title in the RBL and the comparison list. For both lists, the number of print copies was counted—ebooks were not included since viewing rights differ by library. The classification designated in the catalog (Adult, Juvenile, Young Adult, and mixed status) was also recorded. For the RBL, the content of the book (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, or Multiple) was recorded.

Findings

Close to half (47%, or 14 titles out of 30) of the list is made up of titles with gay main characters or themes. Nine titles (or 30%) feature lesbian main characters or themes, four titles (13%) have transgender characters or themes, and two titles (7%) have characters or themes across multiple categories. The 2014 RBL has only one title, or 3%, for teens on bisexuality. Of the 30 titles, the majority are fiction, with 21 being listed as such (70%)—excluding four graphic novels with fictional content. The list is 10% nonfiction and 17% graphic novels. The only juvenile book, representing 3% of the list, is fiction with a gay main character.



Seven titles on the list were owned by less than half of the libraries surveyed. Of these seven titles, four were classified as having a lesbian main character or themes. One title in this category was not purchased by any of the ten public libraries, and another was only purchased by one of the libraries. Therefore, out of nine titles falling into the lesbian category, only six titles were purchased (and still owned) by half of the public libraries used in the study. The remaining three titles had gay main characters or themes.

Regarding books in the transgender category, the only nonfiction title was owned by six out of the ten libraries, but nine copies of the work were found in the six libraries. The transgender graphic novel was purchased by six of the ten libraries, totaling 17 copies. The final transgender title, a fiction novel, was more widely purchased—all ten libraries owned it, with a total of 89 copies.

When looking at overall number of copies, 11 titles had over 120 copies in circulation across the ten libraries—ranging from 306 to 123. The 2014 RBL Top Ten had five titles on the list, with over 120 copies. The top title and the title with the third most copies were also on the BFYA Top Ten list (Table 1).

Table 1

Title	Total number of copies	Theme
Smith, Andrew. <i>Winger</i> . [†] Simon & Schuster, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	306	Gay
Block, Francesca Lia. <i>Love in the Time of Global Warming</i> . [*] Henry Holt, 2013. Grades 9–12.	185	Multiple
Federle, Tim. <i>Better Nate than Ever</i> . ^{*,†} Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2013. Grades 4 and up.	180	Gay
Farizan, Sara. <i>If You Could Be Mine</i> . [*] Algonquin Young Readers, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	177	Lesbian
Levithan, David. <i>Two Boys Kissing</i> . Random House, 2013. Grades 8 and up.	173	Multiple

^{*}Denotes Top Ten for RBL 2014; [†]Denotes Top Ten for BFYA.

There was only one title, *Giraffe People* by Jill Malone, which was not owned in any of the ten libraries surveyed. The titles with the lowest number of copies are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Title	Total number of copies	Theme
Sutherland, Suzanne. <i>When We Were Good</i> . Sumach Press, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	8	Lesbian
Moynihan, Lindsay. <i>The Waiting Tree</i> . Amazon Children's Publishing, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	5	Gay
Egloff, Z. <i>Leap</i> . [*] Bywater Books, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	1	Lesbian
Fishback, Jere M. <i>Tyler Buckspan</i> . Prizm/Torquere Press, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	1	Gay

*Denotes Top Ten for RBL 2014.

Three of the ten public libraries had at least 80% of the titles from the 2014 RBL—with the highest percentage of ownership being 90%, or 27 out of 30 titles, and the lowest being 53% (16 titles). The average ownership was 70% of the titles. In total, the ten libraries owned 2,417 copies of titles from the 2014 RBL.

The majority of titles were classified as YA in the online library catalog—in 22 of the 30 titles, the YA category received the highest number of marks versus adult, juvenile, and mixed. There were eight titles that were designated as juvenile by some libraries. However, the majority of libraries applied the juvenile designation to only two titles: the first, *Better Nate than Ever* by Tim Federle, is also classified as juvenile by the RBL; the second is the graphic novel *Wandering Son*, vol. 4, by Shimura Takako. Federle's book is categorized as gay, and Takako's graphic novel is categorized as transgender. One library was excluded from the juvenile count since the library did not have a YA category in the catalog.

Overall, 12 titles were designated as adult by some of the libraries, but there were four instances in which the majority of libraries designated the titles as ADU, or adult, in their online catalog. Only one of the four titles was categorized as transgender, while the other three were categorized as lesbian. In the case of *Calling Dr. Laura: A Graphic Memoir* by Nicole Georges, all ten libraries owned the title, but eight of them housed it in the adult collection. Similarly, *Blue Is the Warmest Color* by Julie Maroh was owned by eight libraries, but seven of them classified it as adult. Only one library purchased Z. Eglhoff's *Leap* and classified it as adult.

There were 5,798 print copies of the 30 titles from the comparison list in the collections of the ten libraries versus the 2,417 from the 2014 RBL. The two titles that were found on both lists remained in the study. In both instances, the number of copies increased in the month between data collection. *Better Nate than Ever* increased by 25 copies and *Winger* increased by four.

All ten public libraries had at least 90% of the titles from the comparison list—with the highest percentage of ownership being 100% for four libraries. The average ownership was 96% of the control list titles being owned versus 70% average ownership for 2014 RBL titles.

Additionally, none of the libraries owned all of the 2014 RBL titles, but four libraries owned all of the comparison list titles.

When looking at volume of ownership, there are some rather stark differences between numbers of copies owned (Table 3). Even adding up all five titles with the fewest copies from the 2014 RBL, the number is still less than half of the title with the lowest number of copies from the comparison list. Additionally, the title with highest number of copies on the 2014 RBL—which also happens to be on BFYA—would not even make the top five from the comparison list.

Table 3

Comparison List		2014 RBL	
Highest	Lowest	Highest	Lowest
489	37	306	0
489	52	185	1
378	66	180	1
355	67	177	5
322	72	173	8

The majority of titles from the 2014 RBL were classified as YA in the online library catalog—in 22 of the 30 titles. In fact, the YA category received the highest number of entries as compared to those classified as adult, juvenile, and mixed. In contrast, there were three titles from the comparison list that were classified as adult by at least one library. However, there were no instances where the majority of the copies were designated as adult. There were three titles on the comparison list that received the majority of their classification as juvenile, including one of the duplicate titles from the 2014 RBL—*Better Nate than Ever*.

Discussion

As discussed in the literature review, it is estimated that LGBTQ adults make up at least 3.5% of the adult population. In addition, there are nearly “700,000 transgender individuals in the US. Given these findings, it seems reasonable to assert that approximately 9 million [adult] Americans identify as LGBT.”^{xxviii} Statistics that accurately capture the extent of the teen LGBTQ population are harder to produce. However, some estimates suggest that about two and half million teens fall into this category.^{xxix} Regardless of the exact figure, it is certainly in the

millions, which underscores the necessity of ensuring that quality LGBTQ resources are available for teens in libraries around the country. To effectively serve this population, librarians must calibrate their approach to collection management by relying on a variety of booklists and sources to inform effective collection development.

Overall, ownership of the 2014 RBL was approximately 42% of the comparison list. In general, libraries owned fewer copies of RBL titles than those on the comparison list. The limited amount of LGBTQ resources available in libraries may force library users to reserve materials on a sensitive topic and thereby contribute to the struggles of an already vulnerable population. As stated by Cockett:

A balanced fiction collection should assuage the fears of gay and lesbian YAs, assuring them that they are not alone. But just as importantly, it will give heterosexual youth a picture of and perhaps some insight into the larger world around them.^{xxx}

The 2014 RBL was heavily weighted toward teens and toward fiction. Though it is difficult to determine if the list equitably addresses gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender themes, respectively, an initial review of the items listed on the 2014 RBL suggests that it is more focused on gay characters and themes. This is consistent with earlier research by Jenkins^{xxxix} and has also been identified by Cart, who further laments a lack of diversity of genres within the listed fiction.^{xxxix} Ideally, LGBTQ literature would be balanced in its representation of the individual members comprising its population. Efforts to include more lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters and themes on future RBLs should be expanded.

Limitations

Due to the limited number of libraries surveyed in this study—the public libraries from the top ten largest cities in the United States—the work described here cannot provide definitive answers or be used to make generalizations on library ownership of 2014 RBL or how that ownership compares to other booklists. The small sample size of thirty books in ten public libraries also makes statistical analysis beyond descriptive methods unreliable. Another limitation of this study is that the consistency of data collection was dependent on several graduate students following the design protocol exactly, and that the authors used online resources, such as Goodreads and Amazon, to determine the book theme/category and not the books themselves. Additionally,

library collections change—books are added and deleted continually. The data on ownership of the 2014 RBL and the created 2014 Top Ten comparison list, all of which were announced or released in January 2014, were collected in July 2015. This was done in order to give libraries time to research and purchase materials; however, this also means that in the eighteen months between when the list was released and when the data were collected, materials may have been removed due to loss, damage, wear, theft, low circulation, or any other number of valid reasons.

Conclusion

While progress has been made—consider the fact that there was not even a Rainbow Book List until 2008—there is more work to be done. As the only ALA book list on LGBTQ issues for teens and youth, librarians should consider the significance of the booklist and include it as an evaluative measure in their purchasing decisions. Although it may be difficult to accurately pinpoint the exact number of teens dealing with LGBTQ issues and relationships, estimates demonstrate that there is a need for LGBTQ resources to be readily available in support of this population. Additionally, exposure to these issues for non-LGBTQ students is essential for developing understanding and acceptance. If libraries are only purchasing a few LGBTQ titles from booklists or a few copies of these titles, are they really meeting the needs of youth? Booklist committee members need to strive for more balanced lists with more titles for younger individuals, diversity in types of fiction and theme, and more nonfiction, provided that the publishing industry supports this balance and the titles fit their criteria. Libraries and researchers would benefit from additional investigation into libraries' collections on LGBTQ materials for youth and teens.

Notes

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- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ^{iv} YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association, “About YALSA,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/aboutyalsa>.
- ^v Rainbow Book List, “About,” January 30, 2009, <http://glbrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/about>.
- ^{vi} YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association, “Best Fiction for Young Adults,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/best-fiction-young-adults>.
- ^{vii} YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association, “Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/quick-picks-reluctant-young-adult-readers>.
- ^{viii} YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association, “YALSA’s Teen’ Top Ten,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/teenstopten>.
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- ^x Jennifer Chance Cook, “GLBTQ Teen Literature: Is It Out There in Indiana?” *Indiana Libraries* 23, no. 2 (December 2004): 25–28.

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- ^{xi} Kynita Stringer-Stanback, “Young Adult Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Nonfiction Collections and Countywide Anti-Discrimination Policies,” *Urban Library Journal* 17, no. 2 (2011).
- ^{xii} Michele Boon and Vivian Howard, “Recent Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Fiction for Teens: Are Canadian Libraries Providing Adequate Collections?” *Collection Building* 23, no. 3 (2004): 133–38.
- ^{xiii} Alex Spence, “Gay Young Adult Fiction in the Public Library: A Comparative Survey,” *Public Libraries* 38, no. 4 (July 1999): 224.
- ^{xiv} Beth Brendler et al., “Provide the Highest Level of Service: Public Library Collections of LGBTQ Materials for Adolescents in the United States,” *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1–32.
- ^{xv} Candi Pierce Garry, “Selection or Censorship? School Librarians and LGBTQ Resources,” *School Libraries Worldwide* 21, no. 1 (January 2015): 73–90.
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- ^{xx} Casey Rawson, “Are All Lists Created Equal? Diversity in Award-Winning and Best-Selling Young Adult Fiction,” *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* 1, no. 3 (2011).
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^{xxiv} YALSA, “Best Fiction for Young Adults,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/best-fiction-young-adults>.

^{xxv} YALSA, “Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/quick-picks-reluctant-young-adult-readers>.

^{xxvi} YALSA, “YALSA’s Teen’ Top Ten,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/teenstopten>.

^{xxvii} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health,” <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/>.

^{xxviii} Gates, “How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender?”

^{xxix} Rauch, “GLBTQ Collections Are for Every Library Serving Teens!,” 216–18.

^{xxx} Cockett, “Entering the Mainstream,” 32.

^{xxxi} Christine Jenkins, “Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian Characters and Themes 1969–92: A Historical Reading of Content, Gender, and Narrative Distance,” *Youth Services in Libraries* 7, no. 1 (1993): 43–55.

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