

# The Treatment of Gay and Lesbian Fiction for Young Adults in the Reviewing Media

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*The treatment of potentially controversial materials is of great interest to library and information science scholars and practitioners because of the commitment of the profession to the principles of intellectual freedom and access to information. An examination of collection management activities is one way to determine if and how librarians implement these principles in their professional work. Gay and lesbian novels for teens may be regarded as potentially controversial materials because of their "sensitive" content and because of the young age of the intended user group. In this study an in-depth, case study approach was used to analyse reviews for three important YA gay/lesbian novels to determine how these materials were treated by reviewers and if the reviews contained any elements that were likely to affect selection decisions of librarians. Findings indicate that most reviews (83.1%) were favourable and usually contained clear references (88.1%) to the homosexual content. However, over the publication period (1969 - 1995) of the reviews, treatment of the homosexual content changed from acknowledgement coupled with disdain to the overzealousness of political correctness.*

## **Introduction**

The book reviews of three young adult novels with gay or lesbian content were examined to determine how books of this nature are treated by the review media. John Donovan's *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*, published in 1969; *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden, published in 1982; and Diana Wieler's

award winning *Bad Boy* published in 1982, can all be considered benchmark novels. *I'll Get There* is widely accepted to be the first young adult novel to openly and honestly describe a homosexual encounter between two boys. *Annie on My Mind*, while not the first lesbian love story to be presented in a young adult novel, does represent the first novel that celebrates an affair between two adolescent girls. *Bad Boy* is unique in its portrayal of the effects of homophobia on a friendship between two boys and in the author's creation of the character of Tulsa Brown who is proud and self-accepting of his homosexuality. *Bad Boy* has won several awards including the Governor General's Literary Award, the Canadian Booksellers' Ruth Schwartz Award and the Canadian Library Association's Young Adult Book Award. *Bad Boy* and *Annie on My Mind* are still in print, but *I'll Get There* is not. By examining the reviews of these novels a picture of the treatment of young adult novels with gay and lesbian themes emerges, a picture which should be available to those who use reviews to make decisions about which books to include in their library collections. Several questions arise: Were these books given favourable reviews? Was the homosexual content made obvious to readers of the reviews? Was the homosexual content seen as problematic? Were there differences among review journals in terms of their treatment of the novels? Perhaps the first question to be answered though may be: Why does it matter if gay and lesbian novels for young adults get good, bad or no reviews at all?

### **A Need for Fiction That Reflects YA Lives**

There have been so few novels with gay and lesbian characters published for young adults<sup>1</sup> that an argument could be made that all such novels are review-worthy. Compounding the lack of titles is the fact that many of the existing books present negative stereotypes of gays and lesbians. The three titles chosen for this study are rare in their positive, non-judgmental and straightforward depictions of homosexual encounters, attractions and full-fledged affairs. Books such as these provide much needed information and comfort to teenagers exploring or confirming their own sexual orientation, teenagers who often are faced with messages from parents, teachers, clergy and others that heterosexuality is "normal" and "natural" meaning, therefore, that homosexuality is "abnormal" and "unnatural" (Leck, 1995). All teenagers can relate to the characters in these three books. Davy is lost and lonely after his grandmother's death and his subsequent move to New York City with

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jenkins (1998) between 1969 and 1997 there were just over one hundred titles published in English.

distracted and inattentive parents. Annie experiences the entire range of emotions associated with first love from fear to boundless joy. A.J. must deal with his anger, sense of betrayal and confusion over Tully's disclosure that he is gay. If we believe that young adults want, deserve and need their own literature on all kinds of topics, including realistic, sympathetic and honest representations of gay and lesbian identities, then it is essential that these books be represented in the review media.

### **Book Reviews and Collection Development: A Brief Overview of the Research**

Book reviews have been identified as an important factor in collection development decisions in all types of libraries, including public libraries. Some studies have indicated that librarians use reviews of controversial titles both to select books and then to defend their choices during later challenges. In 1981 Serebnick found a direct relationship between the number of reviews received by controversial, adult, nonfiction titles with subject headings pertaining to sex and whether or not the same titles were included in the holdings of sample libraries. Serebnick went on to expand this study with larger sample sizes and found consistent results (Serebnick and Cullars, 1984; Serebnick, 1992). Other studies have examined the treatment of titles by the review media or the role reviews play in collection development decisions (Tisdell, 1958; Busha, 1968; Stubbs and Broadus, 1969; Mendell et al., 1993; Natowitz and Carlo, 1997; Palmer, 1991; Shaw, 1991). A study by Sweetland and Christianson (1995) analysed the reviews and library holdings for a sample of gay, lesbian and bisexual titles for adults. Sweetland and Christianson found that, in terms of the number of reviews received, the books were purchased by fewer libraries than expected. They concluded that this effect may be explained by librarian bias. A recent study by Rothbauer and McKechnie (1999) found that Canadian public libraries provide limited access to gay and lesbian themed fiction for young adults through their holdings of these materials. If young adult collection development librarians are using reviews to identify and evaluate titles, could it be that the content of the reviews of young adult novels with gay and lesbian themes is influencing their decisions? We undertook an examination of all available reviews for the three benchmark titles identified in the introduction (to be extended in the future by a further analysis of reviews from five prominent reviewing journals for a larger sample of forty titles) to help us understand this phenomenon better.

### **Methodology**

#### **1. Choosing the Novels**

Three novels were selected from an authoritative, comprehensive

bibliography of titles for young adults with gay and lesbian themes (Jenkins 1998). As mentioned above, the titles were selected for their status as important, benchmark novels. We assumed that, because of their prominence, of all possible gay lesbian themed novels for young adults, these were among the most likely to be held by libraries. In fact, in a project designed to test holdings of gay and lesbian themed fiction for young adults in Canadian public libraries (Rothbauer and McKechnie, 1999), *Bad Boy* was held by thirty-six (90%) of the forty libraries, *Annie on My Mind* by nineteen (47.5%) and *I'll Get There* by eighteen (45%).

In order to provide both context for and understanding of the opinions expressed by reviewers, we read the novels. All three titles contain substantial gay/lesbian content that would warrant mention in reviews, in that they have main characters who experience or respond to some aspect of homosexual behaviour or identity.

## 2. Book Review Collection and Selection

*Book Review Index*, up to and including the third volume of the 1998 edition, was searched thoroughly for review citations. Some of the items indexed turned out to be lengthy discussions of literary merit or theoretical approaches to the themes as opposed to "true" reviews. This was particularly true for *Bad Boy*. Articles of this nature were rejected, as were non-evaluative booklists or bibliographies. Eighty-two entries were found, of which fifteen were rejected as unsuitable. Of the remaining sixty-seven, eight reviews were not available. A total of fifty-nine reviews were actually examined. Table 1 indicates the number of reviews identified, rejected, unavailable and actually examined for each title.

**Table 1**  
**Number of Reviews Identified, Rejected, Not Available**  
**and Examined per Title**

Title	Number of Reviews			
	Identified	Rejected	Not Available	Examined
<i>I'll Get There</i>	28	6	1	21 (95.5%)
<i>Annie on My Mind</i>	24	3	4	17 (81.0%)
<i>Bad Boy</i>	30	6	3	21 (97.5%)
<b>Total</b>	82	15	8	59 (88.1%)

See Appendix 1 for a complete list of review citations. Appendix 2 indicates the range of journals represented as well as the number of reviews examined per journal.

### 3. Evaluation of Book Reviews

Once the book reviews were collected it was necessary to design a set of measurable criteria to evaluate each review. While it is difficult to objectively measure a reviewer's attitude towards gay and lesbian themed young adult novels, it is a relatively simple exercise to determine if a book has been reviewed favourably, unfavourably or if it has been given a neutral review. Sometimes the review journal itself (e.g., *VOYA* and *Horn Book Guide*) included a rating level with its reviews. Generally it was possible to distinguish a favourable review from an unfavourable one by assessing overall tone and the opening and closing remarks. For example, an unfavourable review clearly indicated the reviewer's criticism of characterization, literary style and/or overall credibility. Favourable reviews clearly praised these elements. Neutral reviews most often contained simple plot summaries that did not include critiques, critiqued one element of the story while suggesting that overall that the novel was satisfying, or did not clearly recommend either purchase or rejection of the title.

It was also possible to measure how well or poorly a reviewer provided access to homosexual content by analysing each review for mention of it. Some reviewers seemed to assume that the readers already knew that these titles had homosexual content and only alluded to it. Other reviewers suggested that this type of content was present by using euphemistic or oblique phrasing such as the two girls "become intimate" or experience an "intense mutual attraction."

### 4. Coding and Inter-Coder Reliability

Each of the reviews was coded to answer the following questions: Overall, was the review favourable, unfavourable or neutral? Was the homosexual content mentioned, alluded to, or not mentioned at all? To be coded as directly mentioned, the reviewer had to specifically indicate that the novels had gay and lesbian characters, explored gay/lesbian themes or presented overtly homosexual encounters. Words like "homosexual," "gay" or lesbian" were frequently found in reviews that were coded as "directly mentioned." If it was not clear but the homosexual content was hinted at, the review was coded as "alluding to" homosexual content. If there was neither mention nor allusion, the review was coded as not indicating homosexual content. Reviews were also analysed for noticeable bias on the part of the reviewers.

To test for inter-coder reliability, the entire set of reviews was independently coded by another individual using the same coding scheme. Of the 118 coding decisions made, the coders agreed 109 times, giving an agreement rate of 92.4%

which clearly surpasses the recommended level of 70% (Krippendorff, 1980: 147). Of the nine disagreements, four were related to overall tone of the review and five to the judgement of the mention of homosexual content. For both measures when disagreement occurred, it was to one degree of criteria. For example, in cases of disagreement about the overall tone of a review, one reviewer may have coded the review as neutral while the other labelled it as unfavourable.

## Findings

### 1. Tone of the Overall Review

All three titles received mainly positive reviews and only rarely got negative or neutral reviews. Eighty-three percent of the total number of reviews were favourable, indicating that the merits of each title were clearly conveyed to potential buyers and readers. The reviews were published over a period of twenty-six years, from 1969 to 1995, and were found in thirty-three different journals. Only four (6.7%) negative reviews were found. These were published in four different journals from 1969 to 1992. Negative reviews indicated that the book was either seriously flawed or clearly did not recommend it for purchase. Six reviews (10.2%) were neutral in overall tone. The neutral reviews only provided plot summaries or character descriptions. Four of the six neutral reviews, found in six different journals, were published in the early 1990's, one in 1982 and one in 1969.

There were small differences between the three titles in terms of the tone of reviews. *I'll Get There* received the highest percentage, 9.5% as opposed to 5.9% for *Annie on My Mind* and 4.8% for *Bad Boy*, of unfavourable reviews. *Annie on My Mind* received the most neutral reviews, 17.6% compared to 9.5% for *Bad Boy* and 4.8% for *I'll Get There*.

Table 2 summarizes the findings about tone of the reviews.

### 2. Treatment of Homosexual Content

Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* scored highest in terms of direct mention of homosexual content. Every review (17 or 100%) made it clear that the book deals with a lesbian affair between two high-school seniors. While only one reviewer (4.8%) did not mention that *I'll Get There* includes descriptions of homosexual encounters between two thirteen year old boys, four reviews (19.0%) only alluded to the content obliquely. The homosexual content of *Bad Boy* was directly referred to in all but two (19 or 90.5%) of the reviews examined, with the remaining two reviews (9.5%) alluding to the content.

Table 3 summarizes the findings about treatment of homosexual content in the reviews.

**Table 2**  
**Tone of Reviews Examined**

Tone	Title			
	<i>I'll Get There</i>	<i>Annie on My Mind</i>	<i>Bad Boy</i>	Total
Favourable	18 (85.7%)	13 (76.5%)	18 (85.7%)	49 (83.1%)
Neutral	1 (4.8%)	3 (17.6%)	2 (9.5%)	6 (10.2%)
Unfavourable	2 (9.5%)	1 (5.9%)	1 (4.8%)	4 (6.7%)
<b>Total</b>	21	17	21	59

**Table 3**  
**Treatment of Homosexual Content in Reviews**

Treatment	Title			
	<i>I'll Get There</i>	<i>Annie on My Mind</i>	<i>Bad Boy</i>	Total
Direct Mention	16 (76.2%)	17 (100%)	19 (90.5%)	52 (88.1%)
Indirect Mention	4 (19.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (9.5%)	6 (10.2%)
No Mention	1 (4.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.7%)
<b>Total</b>	21	17	21	59

### 3. A Closer Look: Treatment of Individual Novels

#### *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*

Eighteen of twenty-one reviews for Donovan's novel were positive, two were unfavourable and one was neutral in tone. The neutral review (Hungerford, 1969) primarily provided a plot synopsis in which the author's literary style was described,

but not praised (“no plot in the old-fashioned sense”) and the use of “natural realism” and the influence of Salinger and *The Catcher in the Rye* were mentioned. In one of the negative reviews, a comparison to Salinger is also made: “...like most first person narration by male teenagers, [it] stands in the shadow of *The Catcher in the Rye*. That is not a fault, since it would be silly for authors to avoid an obvious form merely because others have already used it successfully, but it does invite comparisons which Mr. Donovan’s book cannot stand up to”. Furthermore, the reviewer disliked the characterization, and finally claimed “It is not a good novel but it is readable and interesting” (*Times Literary Supplement*, 1969).

The second negative review by Martha Bacon for *Atlantic Monthly* (1969) compared Donovan’s style to Salinger’s as well, and this time the book was considered “craftsmanlike and competent”. However, Bacon found the theme unsuitable, specifically the “romantic encounter” between Davy and Altschuler. She recommended adult fiction instead, *David Copperfield* and *The Magic Mountain*, which in her view show such romantic encounters “in the context of a larger life”. The homosexual theme was alarming to this reviewer, who claimed that Donovan’s book “might arouse in the unconcerned unnecessary interest or alarm or both”. The fear expressed in this review is that curious young adults who read this book may run the risk of experimenting with their “schoolfellows”.

Just over eighty percent of the reviews examined for *I’ll Get There* were positive, with reviewers recommending the novel to readers by including it on a “best books” list, giving positive descriptions of its literary merit, or indicating it will have “lasting appeal”. One reviewer wondered why he had included the novel on his “best books” list, claiming to find “sexual affection between two adolescent boys” to be “distasteful”, but saying that he added it anyway because of Donovan’s courage to present a homosexual theme, “one heretofore neglected facet of the world” (Woods, 1969).

Other positive reviews used descriptors like: “honest”, “brave,” “perceptive, funny, touching”, “noteworthy”, “beautifully written” and “poignant”. In some reviews the author was lauded not only for writing about homosexuality, but for doing so in a careful, inoffensive manner. Descriptions of the encounter between Davy and Altschuler most frequently highlighted its brevity and spontaneous nature, as if this somehow made it more palatable and less offensive. This approach may be seen in the following excerpts: “brief romantic attachment to another boy” (*Library Journal*, n22, 1969); “slight homosexual incident” (*Horn Book Magazine*, 1969); “brief homosexual affair” (*Saturday Review*, 1969); “an incident with homosexual ingredients” (*Publishers Weekly*, 1969); “a disturbing moment of sexual affection” (*New York Times Book Review*, 1969); “a spontaneous act of sexuality” (*Booklist*, 1969). The message here seemed to be that a little homosexuality was okay and was probably a good thing, so long as it was gentle, not too graphic or serious, and short.



Some reviewers provided more details: the boys were depicted as “sleeping with their arms around each other”, they exchanged “childish caresses...a kiss”, and they are described as having “made out” (MacDuffie, 1969). Another reviewer, who gave *I'll Get There* a good review, is quoted at length to illustrate his particular heterosexist analysis of the novel:

...homosexuality is to some degree a natural occurrence among close friends old enough for sexual desires but without heterosexual outlets. And [Donovan] makes it clear that the best way to counter such desires is to face them honestly for what they are: something beautiful at the moment, but to be replaced in the natural course of life with interest in the other sex (Weston, 1969).

Even though this review was written thirty years ago, it is interesting that Weston made his own discomfort with the topic of homosexuality apparent. In the novel itself there is no indication that Davy's interest in Altschuler is going to be “naturally” replaced by an interest in girls. In one sentence Weston dismisses the teenagers who find it “natural” to be attracted to members of their own sex all of the time regardless of the presence of “heterosexual outlets”. Homosexuality is presented as natural, but only to a point. It is unnatural if these desires exist beyond a spontaneous sexual encounter. Weston also questioned Davy's relationship with his beloved dachshund, calling his feelings for his dog an “aberration”. It may be argued that Weston believes homosexual feelings are similar, akin to “zoophilia and coprolagnia”.

### *Annie on My Mind*

Thirteen of seventeen of the reviews for *Annie on My Mind* were favourable, three were coded as neutral and one was negative. As with *I'll Get There*, the neutral reviews primarily functioned as plot summaries or as short indicators of theme. In all three reviews, rather than the words “lesbian” or “homosexual”, phrases such as “intense mutual attraction” (*Publishers' Weekly*, 1982), “falling in love...with each other” (*Book Report*, 1993), or “fall in love with another girl” (Chelton, 1992) were used to describe the lesbian love affair between Liza and Annie. One of the neutral reviews also criticized the characterizations, interpreting them as being “...on one hand, too idealistic and on the other, impossibly mean” (*Publishers' Weekly*, 1982). Despite their neutral stance, all three reviewers made it very clear that this book is, above all else, a lesbian love story.

*Annie on My Mind* was negatively reviewed by *Kirkus* (1982). In an opinion related in a breezy plot summary, the reviewer indicated that the story was not credible, calling it “a soupy romance, with corny encounters and less-than-subtle characterization of all concerned”. This review made the book sound silly and boring.

Among the favourable reviews, the author's characterizations and story were praised for being sound and credible. The novel was called "candid, dignified, perceptive...with strong characters and [a] tender love story" (*Centre for Children's Books Bulletin*, 1982). Garden was praised for her "detailed, vivid characters" and her "compelling story of two real and intriguing young women" (Sutton, 1982). Mary K. Chelton (1982) called the writing "clear, consistent, at times lyrical, but best of all gut-level believable". Another reviewer wrote that "Garden imbues the characterizations of Liza and Annie with a distinctive vitality" (*Booklist*, 1982).

Most of the favourable reviews praised the novel for its candidness and ability to touch readers while presenting a controversial and honest picture of two young women in love. All seventeen reviews indicated that *Annie on My Mind* had lesbian content. Additionally most reviewers noted that the lesbian content had a sexual component. The two girls were frequently described as "lovers" or as being "intimate". One reviewer used the graphic, somewhat jarring phrase, "recognition of sexual-genital desire" to describe Annie and Liza's lovemaking.

Sometimes the book was recommended because of its treatment of the lesbian theme. One reviewer stated it is "one that tells what [homosexuality] feels like, one that has, finally, romance" (Sutton, 1982). Another wrote that the "overall positive treatment of female homosexuality outweighs the punishment of the teachers, thus this well-written book would make a most welcome addition to any adolescent library" (Wilson, 1984). Finally, the value of the lessons in Garden's novel is recommended with these words: "Although the author runs the risk of frightening a young lesbian about the possible reactions to her sexuality, she is also providing a healthy and supportive view of how gays and lesbians can respond to discrimination" (Gordon, 1983).

### *Bad Boy*

The only Canadian novel in this sample, *Bad Boy* received eighteen favourable reviews, two neutral reviews and one negative review. The unfavourable review criticized the credibility of the story, with the reviewer saying that he "frankly [does not] believe the story" and that the "weak characters and awkward style will cause most to dismiss this title". He also seemed particularly offended by the setting, not realizing that Moosejaw is indeed a real city in Canada (Cuseo, 1992).

Most reviewers, as shown by the following excerpts, praised *Bad Boy*: "strong characterizations" (*Booklist*, 1990); "well-drawn complex characters" (*Kirkus*, 1992); "believable, rich cast of characters" (*Horn Book Guide*, 1992); "marvellous, sensitive, funny, touching" and "enlightened novel" (Callwood, 1989). In general *Bad Boy* was praised for its writing style and for tackling the challenging portrayal of a unapologetic gay teen and his aggressively homophobic best friend.

Once again the two neutral reviews provided plot summaries: A.J. finds out that his best friend is gay and through a series of challenges to his sense of self, he overcomes his feelings of rage, betrayal and fear. In one of these reviews the characterization was praised. The reviewer went on to describe the story as “not quite believable” and “issue-laden” (Forman, 1992).

Nineteen reviewers indicated that Wieler explored homosexual themes. The two reviews that did not, both found in the same issue of *Booklist* (v. 86, 1993; 1343,1346) were very brief. While one makes mention of Tully’s “secret”, both really only indicate to the reader that this book is about hockey.

The discussion of homosexuality in these reviews frequently focussed on A.J.’s reaction to Tully’s disclosure, or as one reviewer wrote, “He now agonizes over two important questions: If I like Tulsa so much, does that mean I’m also gay? Does Tulsa see me as more than a friend and secretly want me as a lover?” (Carter, 1993). The revelation, in the words of another reviewer, “shakes A.J. to the foundation and makes him question his own nature, his ability to read people, his self-confidence” (*Children’ Book News*, 1989).

The final point to make about the treatment of the homosexual content in *Bad Boy* is that the book has two main characters, A.J. And Tully. June Callwood (1989) was the only reviewer who considered the characterization of the gay protagonist in any detail. Most other reviewers ignored his active role in the story and in the struggles that A.J. experienced.

## Discussion

### 1. Beyond Homosexuality

The findings of this study show that important, benchmark gay and lesbian novels for young adults received favourable reviews from a variety of mainstream reviewing media. In a future study we plan to examine reviews for a larger sample, including titles that are not as prominent, to see how generalizable the results are.

Many of the fifty-nine reviews in this sample emphasized the homosexual content to the exclusion of other important themes in the novels. While each of the three novels presents gay or lesbian characters or experiences, each one also deals with other issues of importance to young adults such as loss and grief, social responsibility, career and education decisions, friendship and parents. It is interesting to note that reviewers of the earliest book, *I’ll Get There*, did a much fuller job of presenting all of the important themes, possibly because they were reluctant to describe the homosexual encounter in full detail. Review readers learn that *I’ll Get There* has passages with homosexual content, but they also know that the book is about coping with loss due to death, living with an alcoholic mother, dealing with the

consequences of having divorced parents, and what it is like to live in New York City.

The treatment of *Annie on My Mind*, published thirteen years after *I'll Get There*, is, like the novel itself, more frank and direct. *Annie on My Mind* is primarily a lesbian love story. If reviewers did not make this clear they would be misrepresenting the novel. Fifteen of the seventeen reviews studied for this project indicated that Annie and Liza fell in love or were involved in a lesbian relationship in the first one or two sentences of the review.

In *Bad Boy*, A.J. tries to come to terms with the fact that his best friend Tulsa is gay. While not the only theme in the novel, it is the major one. Wieler's creation of a self-accepting gay teen was radically new. In 1982 Garden's Liza had spirit-crushing bouts of guilt and shame; in 1989 Tully experiences none. This unique contribution to gay and lesbian fiction for teenagers was not commented upon by reviewers.

## 2. From Warning to Acceptance

The reviews of *I'll Get There*, the oldest of the three novels investigated, contained warnings and assurances directed at the reader. It was almost as if the reviews were saying "This book contains homosexual content. But, don't worry - it is not offensive." For example, one review said "...don't be put off when you hear...that it is a story about homosexuality, because it isn't" (*Publisher's Weekly*, 1969). Another review expressed worry that adults would be deterred by the "profanity and homosexual incident", but recommended the book anyway (*Booklist*, 1969). A review from *Catholic Library World* (1970) reassured readers that no one should be deterred from reading an "otherwise good story", a reference to the "problem of homosexuality".

By the time *Annie on My Mind* was published in 1982, attitudes towards homosexuality had changed. Reviewers included themselves and their readers in a group of people who could be tolerant and accepting of a lesbian love story. One reviewer wrote that there was something in the book for everyone, "including unfortunately, the prurient interest of censors". This reviewer also used gay/lesbian slang such as "coming out" and "butch/femme" (Chelton, 1982). Another reviewer, a year later, prefaced her positive review with the claim that the "developing love relationship [is] not understood by much of society" (Greenlaw, 1983: 465). By the time *Annie on My Mind* came out it was possible for reviewers to communicate that being lesbian or becoming lesbian did not always have to be equated with "sex", and that the romantic elements of the lesbian love affair could be compelling to readers as well (Wilson, 1984).

Reviewers of *Bad Boy* (1989) had accepted the notion of gay teenagers and teen sexuality in general. Homosexuality was viewed as one alternative in a range of

possibilities. The book was seen as a vehicle of enlightenment and insight into these ideas (*English Journal*, 1992). One review stated that “Wieler’s evocative novel addresses several aspects of teenage sexuality, presenting an honest and open account of feelings experienced by boys...of young men coming to grips with their emerging sexual awareness and self-concept” (*Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy*, 1995). In fact, most reviewers were straightforward in their discussion of the homosexual content. However, even though it is the most prominent issue explored in *Bad Boy*, reviewers were still reluctant to use the word “homophobia”, suggesting instead that Tully’s sexual orientation was “an issue” that had to be “dealt with” by A.J. unless he wanted to risk “destroying their friendship” (see Knoth, 1992; *English Journal*, 1992; *Booklist*, 1993; *Journal of Reading*, 1993; Kertzer, 1992).

### 3. The Emergence of a Subgenre

In 1969 with *I’ll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*, John Donovan published what has come to be accepted as the first young adult novel with gay and lesbian content. Since then many more titles have appeared and continue to appear. This suggests that gay lesbian fiction now constitutes a distinct sub-genre of fiction for young adults. The emergence, development and firm establishment of this sub-genre is evident in the reviews of the novels examined in this study.

Reviewers noted the groundbreaking status of *I’ll Get There*, sometimes enthusiastically and sometimes reluctantly, as can be seen in the following two excerpts:

Their common understanding and the tension they both live under explodes into a sexual confrontation between the two boys (certainly a “first” in the annals of juvenile literature)...This is a beautifully written, poignant depiction of how Davy absorbs his experience and begins to grow toward manhood (*Commonweal*, 1969).

In the last few years we have seen the rise of a singular form of problem novel...[*I’ll Get There*] celebrates the child’s homosexual encounter with a schoolfellow...The loss of innocence is an adult’s subject. Once we have put it behind us, there is no return to the world or the speech of childhood. The language of children is inadequate to it, and the application of grammar school jargon to corruption and passion is neither natural nor comforting (Bacon, 1969).

When *Annie on My Mind* was published, reviewers made references to other, similar books. For example it was considered better than Scopetone’s *Trying Hard to Hear You* and *Happy Endings are All Alike* as well as Hautzig’s *Hey Dollface*. It was called an “adolescent Patience and Sarah” (Chelton, 1982). It was compared to Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer*, a heterosexual romance published in 1968, and classed with *Happy Endings are All Alike* (Sutton, 1982). Another reviewer wrote that Garden’s book, like *Hey Dollface*, illustrated “how difficult it is for

sensitive teenage girls to find a partner” (Yates, 1989).

Finally, by the time *Bad Boy* was published in 1989, reviewers spoke about the book as if it belonged to a separate body of young adult literature. For example, Meyer (1992) welcomed Wieler’s book to the “growing body of YA fiction with a gay theme”.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Librarians looking to retrospectively develop gay/lesbian themed fiction collections for young adults would be well advised to remember that these novels were treated somewhat differently by our reviewing media thirty years ago than they are today. What is deemed to be “controversial” changes with time, reflecting the changing values of society. Although this is not surprising, given the long-standing support for intellectual freedom within the profession we did find it interesting that librarians’ responses to and treatment of these materials in the reviewing media also seems to have changed over time. While Weston’s (1969) personal distaste for *I’ll Get There*, simply would not be acceptable today, an element of political correctness seems evident in the emphasis placed on gay/lesbian content to the point of excluding other important themes.

## Appendix 1 - Review Citations

### *I'll Get There, It Better be Worth the Trip*

- Bacon, Martha. Tantrums and Unicorns. *Atlantic Monthly* 224(1969; n6): 148+.
- Bell, Mabel Boyd. Recent Children's Books. *Top of the News* 26(1970; n2): 207.
- Booklist* 65(1969; n20): 1174.
- Booklist* 81(1984; n8): 583.
- Centre for Children's Books Bulletin* 22(1969; n10): 156.
- Commonweal* 90(1969; May 23): 300.
- Hood, Stuart. *Listener* 83(1970; April 16): 519.
- Horn Book Magazine* 45(1969; n4): 415+.
- Hungerford, Edward B. *Children's Book World* 3(1969; May 4): 5.
- Library Journal* 94(1969; n10): 2072.
- Library Journal* 94(1969; n10): 2111.
- Library Journal* 94(1969; n22): 4581.
- McCreeedy, Jo Ann. Books for Young Adults. *Catholic Library World* 40(1969; n9): 589.
- New York Times Book Review* (November 9, 1969): 60.
- Publishers' Weekly* 195(1969; n1): 57.
- Publishers' Weekly* 199(1971; n6): 82.
- Saturday Review* 52(1969; May 10): 59.
- Smeltzer, Mary Etheldreda. Books for School Libraries. *Catholic Library World* 41(1970; n8): 534.
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## Appendix 2 - Number of Reviews Examined per Journal

### Journal Title - Number of Reviews

*Atlantic Monthly* - 1  
*Book Report* - 2  
*Book List* - 8  
*Canadian Children's Literature* - 1  
*Canadian Literature* - 1  
*Catholic Library World* - 2  
*Centre for Children's Books Bulletin* - 3  
*Children's Book News* - 1  
*Children's Book World* - 1  
*Commonweal* - 1  
*Emergency Librarian* - 1  
*English Journal* - 2  
*Horn Book Guide* - 1  
*Horn Book Magazine* - 2  
*Interracial Books for Children* - 1  
*Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy* - 1  
*Journal of Reading* - 2  
*Kirkus Reviews* - 2  
*Kliatt* - 1  
*Library Journal* - 2  
*Listener* - 1  
*Ms* - 1  
*New Advocate* - 1  
*New York Times Book Review* - 3  
*Publishers' Weekly* - 5  
*Quill and Quire* - 1  
*Saturday Review* - 1  
*School Librarian* - 1  
*School Library Journal* - 2  
*Times Educational Supplement* - 1  
*Times Literary Supplement* - 1  
*Top of the News* - 1  
*VOYA* - 3

NOTE: A total of 59 reviews were retrieved from 33 different journals.

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