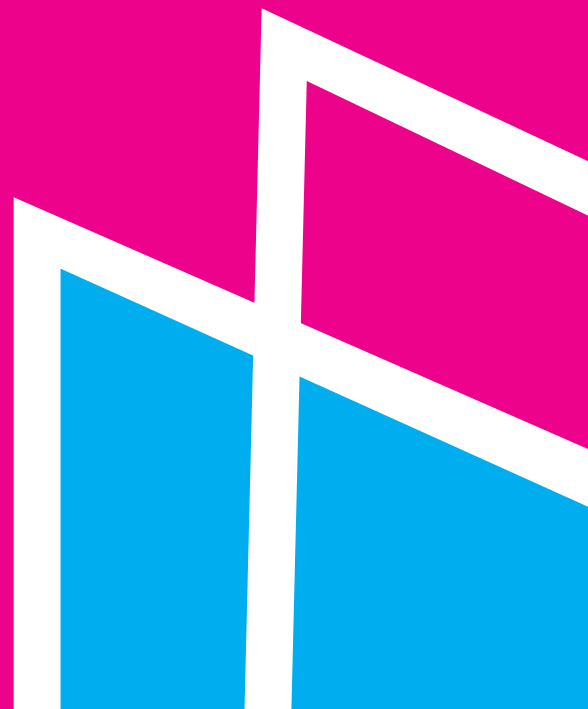


ELAC
ENGLISH LANGUAGE
ARTS COUNCIL

ELAC Recommends: Inclusive Books

**Gender and Sexual Diversity in the
English Language Arts Classroom**

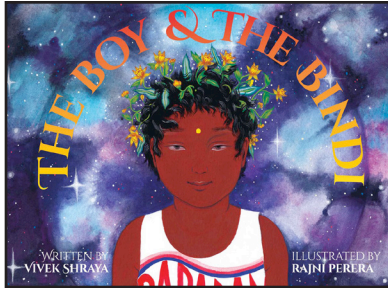


HONORING DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

The English Language Arts Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association believes it is our professional responsibility as teachers to honor the diversity of all our students and to work actively to create more inclusive classrooms. We agree with educational scholars Caroline T Clark and Mollie Blackburn (2009), who have found that "English Language Arts classrooms can be significant sites for combating homophobia and heterosexism in schools, and that reading LGBTQ-themed literature is one of the best ways to do that work" (p.25).

ELAC recommends the following books for use in English Language Arts Classrooms. We believe that these texts deal with issues of gender and sexual diversity in accurate, respectful, nuanced, and age-appropriate ways. We have tried to recommend books that represent the full spectrum of gender and sexual diversity. We have also tried to include books that represent diversity of race, culture, religion, and ability, although we recognize that there is a relative lack of such material currently available.

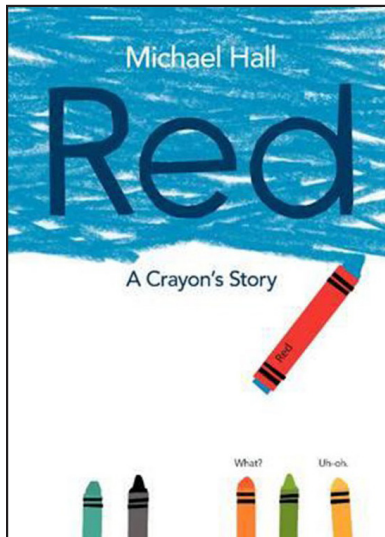
While we have grouped books by division according to our assessment of their content and complexity, we encourage teachers to use their professional judgement and knowledge of their school and community context when making choices about what texts to use in their classrooms.



The Boy and the Bindi

Vivek Shraya | 2016

The Boy and the Bindi beautifully explores the importance of the Bindi within some Indian communities. A young boy asks his mother why she wears the bindi and when she responds that “it keeps [her] safe and true” the boy decides to wear one too. Written by Edmonton-born author and performer Vivek Shraya and beautifully illustrated by Rajni Perera, *The Boy and The Bindi* illustrates the importance of being true to oneself and refusing to conform to gender norms.



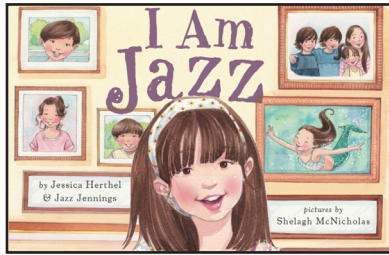
Red: A Crayon's Story

Michael Hall | 2015

When a blue crayon is given a red label, everyone is frustrated that whatever Red draws turns out wrong. Everyone seems to have advice for Red on how to be more red, but nothing works until one day Red's friend suggests being blue. Red is successful and everyone is thrilled with Red's abilities. While not overtly about gender or sexual orientation, the story could be used to open up conversations about being different and coming to terms with who you are.

You may also like:

The Curvy Tree — Chris Colfer (2015)



I am Jazz

Jessica Herthel & Jazz Jennings | 2014

Jazz Jennings achieved international notoriety in 2007 at the age of seven after being interviewed by Barbara Walters on *20/20*. The book begins with Jazz' awareness of her identity as a girl. She does not struggle with this, rather she confidently and proudly corrects people who misgender her and helps to educate them. When she visits the doctor, she learns the word transgender. Her parents affirm their love and support and although she acknowledges that some people are confused about bathrooms or sports teams, Jazz asserts that being different is OK and being happy is the most important thing. Jazz currently has her own TV show on TLC.



We are Family

Patricia Hegarty | 2017

Hegarty's beautiful book features a series of short rhymes that explores the true meaning of family. Featuring dozens of small, colorful illustrations, the book depicts families of all kinds: two parent, one parent, same-gender parent, multigenerational, blended, adopted, extended, etc. The families are racially and culturally diverse and demonstrate that family means spending time together and being there for one another. Although there is no plot, per se, this book could be a nice introduction for a discussion about families in early elementary.

You may also like:

Families, Families, Families — Suzanne Lang & Max Lang (2015)

Heather has Two Mommies — Leslea Newman (2015)

A Family is a Family is a Family — Sarah O'Leary (2016)

The Family Book — Todd Parr (2006)

Donovan's Big Day — Leslea Newman (2011)

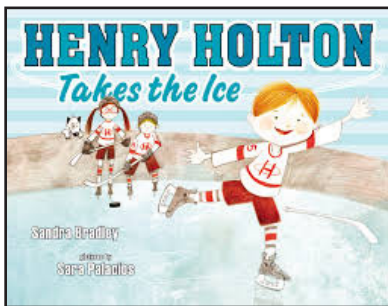
Worm Loves Worm — J.J. Austrian (2016)



This Day in June

Gayle E. Pitman | 2014

Pitman's Stonewall Book Award-winning *This Day in June* explores the excitement before and during a Pride parade. The book depicts the full diversity of queer communities and positions Pride as a celebration in which the whole community can take part. The meaning of the very simple couplets is enhanced through play with font and layout. Some illustrations may prompt questions from young readers and the book includes a helpful teacher guide that includes background information about LGBTQ issues and tips for talking to children of various ages about gender and sexual diversity. With so many books dedicated to other holidays, *This Day in June* is a nice addition that recognizes a day that many celebrate.



Henry Holton Takes the Ice

Sandra Bradley & Sara Palacios | 2015

Henry Holton doesn't like hockey, nor is he good at it. For his hockey-loving family, this is a problem. When Henry sees an ice dancing performance, he discovers a sport that he loves — if only he can convince his family to let him pursue his dreams. While the book does not deal directly with sexual orientation or gender identity, it provides an ideal opportunity for discussion about gender stereotypes and the importance of being yourself.

You may also like:

Ballerino Nate — Kimberly Brubaker Bradley (2006)

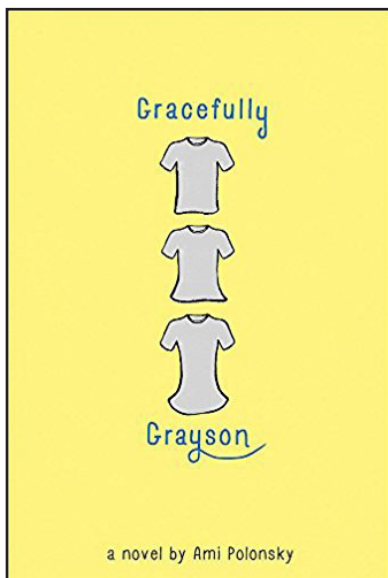
The Boy who Cried Fabulous — Leslea Newman (2004)



George

Alex Gino | 2015

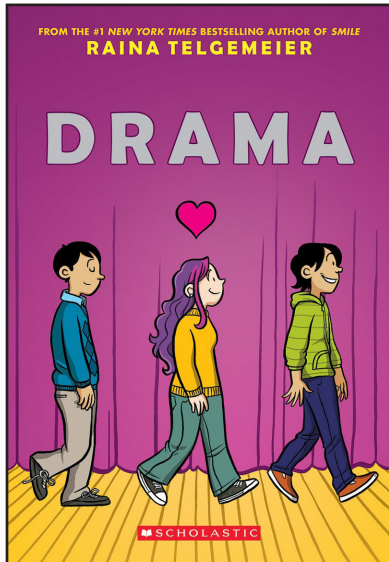
George desperately wants to play Charlotte in her class's upcoming production of *Charlotte's Web*. Unfortunately, her teacher believes that George is a boy and suggests that she play one of the male roles instead. When she shares her feelings with her best friend, the two come up with a plan to show her true self to the school and George's family. This book addresses trans issues directly. George never struggles with her own identity, only with trying to get others to see her for who she is. In this sense, the book would be a positive affirmation for any student dealing with gender issues. Because of its numerous references to E.B. White's classic novel, *George* would make an ideal companion read to *Charlotte's Web*.



Gracefully, Grayson

Ami Polonsky | 2014

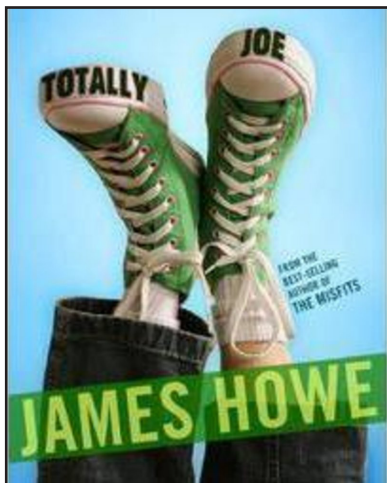
In *Gracefully, Grayson*, the titular protagonist lives with her aunt, uncle, and cousins, as her parents died in a car accident when she was young. Although Grayson knows that she is a girl, she struggles to explain this to others, feeling torn between being herself and fitting in. When her grade six teacher announces the upcoming class play, Grayson decides that she will audition for the role of Persephone. Her teacher encourages her and Grayson finally finds a place that makes her feel comfortable. Meanwhile, Grayson must deal with school bullies and her aunt and cousins who are slow to accept her. Grayson must decide whether she will follow her dreams or change to make others happy. A sub-plot focuses on Grayson's teacher, implied to be gay, who faces discrimination within the community. The complexity of the language and plot would make this well-suited to upper division II.



Drama

Raina Telgemeier | 2012

In this graphic novel, Callie is a young girl who lives for theatre. When she takes on the role of set designer for her middle school production of *Moon over Mississippi*, she must contend with drama onstage and off. Meanwhile, two brothers join the production team and Callie is not sure who she is more interested in. The potential love triangle is complicated by the fact that one of the brothers is gay and by Callie's own realization that neither are really right for her. Instead, Callie decides to focus on doing the best job she can for the play, solving many problems in the process. In addition to including a diverse range of youth, *Drama* celebrates the quirky individuality of students who aren't in the mainstream. The drawings are playful and colorful and the language is straightforward.

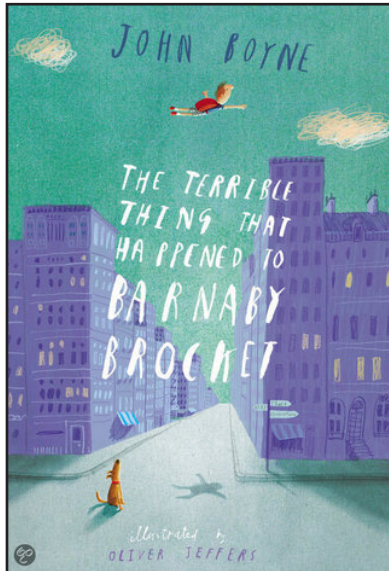


Totally Joe

James Howe | 2005

Totally Joe is a sequel to James Howe's *The Misfits*, although it can be read on its own. Joe, the narrator, is a twelve year old boy who has been assigned an alphabetical autobiography by his teacher in which he must write an entry for each letter of the alphabet, ending each with a life lesson. Each chapter of this novel is themed around one keyword. Joe is gay and clearly comfortable and content with his identity. As he deals with the excitement of getting his first boyfriend — followed by the defeat of a first breakup — Joe contends with the usual problems of life in middle school. While Joe has traditionally feminine interests, he is not a simple stereotype. Nevertheless, this book might require a conversation about how gay people are often represented and how there is no one way to be gay. The structure of the book would lend itself well to being a model for personal response writing.

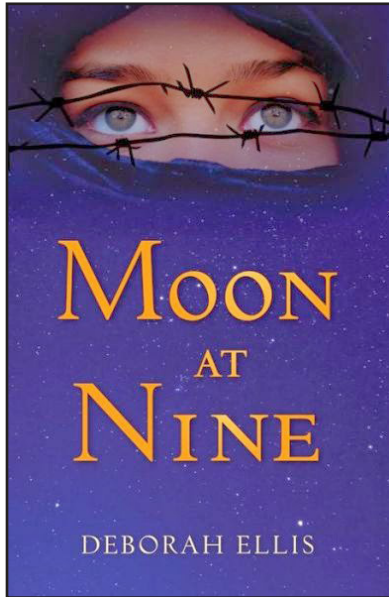
You may also like: Other novels by James Howe



The Terrible Thing that Happened to Barnaby Brocket

John Boyne | 2014

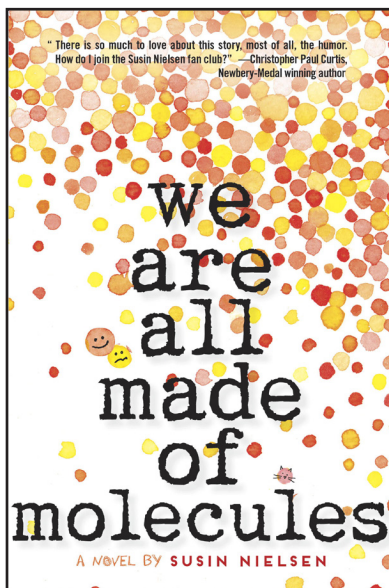
John Boyne's *The Terrible Thing that Happened to Barnaby Brocket* does not deal exclusively with gender or sexual orientation. Rather, it asks questions about what it means to be “normal” and how people come to be perceived as different. Teachers may use this text as an entry point into conversations about LGBTQ issues. This heartwarming book follows Barnaby, born to a perfectly-normal-and-proud-of-it family, who shocks the world when he defies gravity and floats. While he tries his best to please his parents and not float, he cannot fight who he is. When he encounters a hot air balloon, he finds himself on a magical journey and, with the help of new friends, learns to love himself. The fantastical elements of this book make it a fun, plot-driven read that would excite many students.



Moon at Nine

Deborah Ellis | 2014

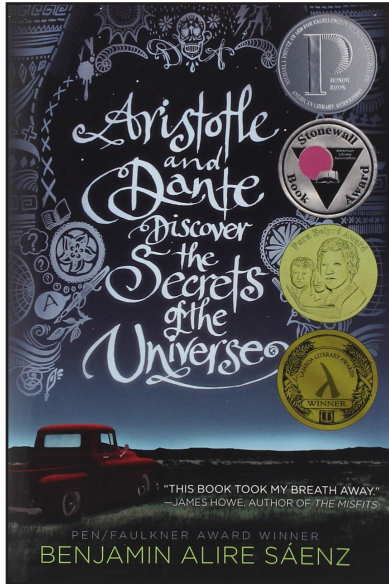
Moon at Nine follows Farrin, a young woman who has spent most of her life living in post-revolution Iran. Soon after meeting Sadira, the new student at her school for gifted girls, Farrin realizes that she is in love — feelings which are reciprocated. When their relationship is discovered, they continue seeing each other in secret until they are ultimately arrested, along with the rest of Farrin’s family. While the focus of the novel is the relationship between the two girls, Ellis skillfully explores life in Iran including issues of women’s rights and forced labour. With relatively straightforward language, complex characters and relevant social issues, this would make a worthwhile classroom novel, particularly for upper division III students.



We are all Made of Molecules

Susin Nielsen & Jorjeana Marie | 2015

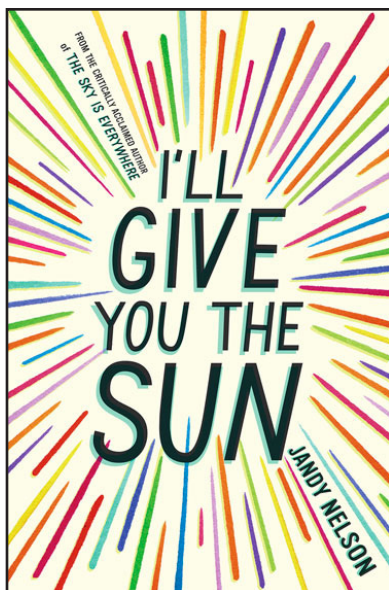
When socially-awkward Stewart’s father remarries, he is forced to move in with his new stepmother and stepsister Ashley, a popular girl who attends the same school as Stewart. Alternating between the perspectives of Stewart and Ashley, the novel explores the struggles of adapting to family changes and mourning the loss of a loved one. Ashley’s life is further complicated by her biological father, who has come out as gay and moved into an apartment over the garage. She struggles to understand him until a homophobic act of vandalism, along with Stewart’s example, help her to accept her father as he is. Given that Ashley’s father and his boyfriend are somewhat stereotypical, teachers may need to discuss the limitations of fictional portrayals and the possibility for a full range of expressions within the LGBTQ community. Stewart’s young voice may make this novel better suited to lower division III.



Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

Benjamin Alire Sáenz | 2012

Set in El Paso, Texas during the 1980s, the novel follows Ari, a young boy with loving parents and no close friends. Silence pervades his family life, as his father struggles to deal with the trauma of Vietnam and his parents refuse to talk about his older brother who was sent to prison. When he meets Dante one summer and Dante offers to teach him to swim, the two become fast friends. Together, they enjoy a summer of fun adventures followed by a series of tragic losses. Over the two years that follow, the boys learn the power of friendship and Ari comes to realize a truth about himself that everyone else seems to already know. Sáenz' lyrical prose make this novel ideal for classroom reading. A sequel is forthcoming.

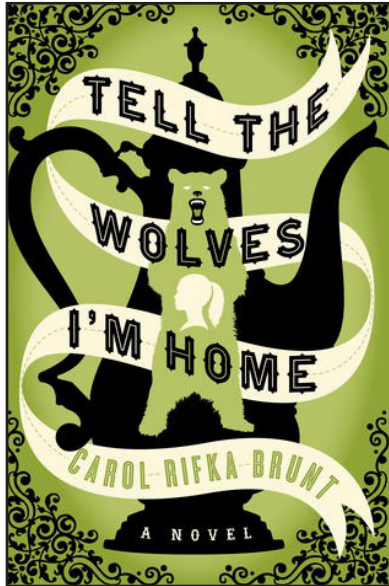


I'll Give You the Sun

Jandy Nelson | 2014

Twins Noah and Jude, equal parts creative and adventurous, are inseparable when they are young. Years later, their relationship has disintegrated completely. Now teenagers, Noah and Jude are struggling with mourning the death of their mother, the looming deadlines of college application, and burgeoning romantic relationships.

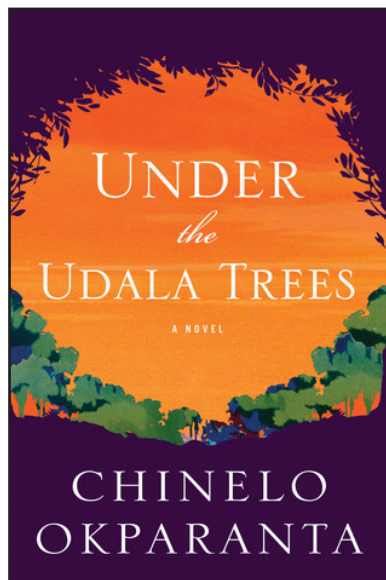
Moving back and forth through time and shifting perspectives between the brother and sister, the novel explores the complexity of family dynamics, the pain of loss, the healing powers of art, the excitement of first relationships, and the enduring power of the sibling bond. The poetic language and evocative descriptions, along with some mature content, make this ideally suited to upper division III.



Tell The Wolves I'm Home

Carol Rifka Brunt | 2012

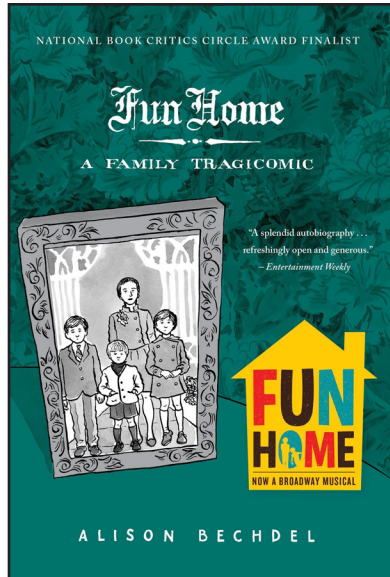
When June Elbus' uncle, the famous painter Finn Weiss, dies of a mysterious illness (which, given the context, is clearly AIDS), June is distraught. Alienated from her sister and a social outcast at school, June feels that she was only ever her true self when she was with her uncle, her best friend and first crush. When she meets a mysterious man at her uncle's funeral (who turns out to have been his long-time partner), June's world is turned upside down. As she becomes better acquainted with this man, June learns secrets about her uncle that she never knew and begins to understand that her uncle had a hidden side. In addition to struggling to understand her late uncle, June also deals with complicated relationships with her mother and sister. The novel perfectly captures the complexity of family relationships and sibling bonds, while also examining the horrors of the AIDS crisis.



Under the Udala Trees

Chinelo Okparanta | 2015

Set in Nigeria at the outbreak of civil war, this novel follows Ijeoma, a young girl who is sent away for protection. Displaced, she meets a girl from a different ethnic community and the two fall in love. When their love is discovered, Ijeoma realizes that she must hide her true self while her mother tries to re-educate her with intensive bible study. When Ijeoma is older, she falls in love with Ndidi, who introduces her to a broader LGBTQ community in Nigeria. A violent episode and continual pressure from her mother prompt her to marry a man. Deeply unhappy in the marriage, she gains the courage to leave and return to her mother's home, where she is finally accepted. This novel presents a complex portrait of Nigeria that will challenge the stereotypical notion that many students have of "Africa." This novel contains descriptions of sexual activity.



Fun Home

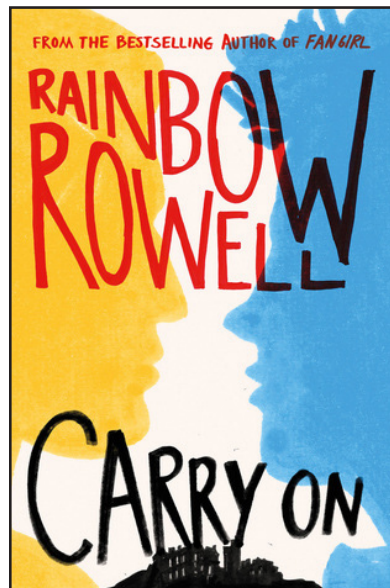
Alison Bechdel | 2007

Alison Bechdel is the award-winning cartoonist of the long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. In her graphic memoir *Fun Home* Bechdel recalls her own coming out experience at university and examines her complicated relationship with her father, who comes out around the same time. The graphic novel spans three different periods of Bechdel's life and explores themes of sexuality, families, mental health, emotional abuse, and suicide. In 2013 it was adapted into a Tony award-winning musical. Teachers should be advised that a few panels of the novel depict a sexual encounter.

You may also like:

Skim — Mariko Tamaki & Jillian Tamaki (2008)

My Favourite thing is Monsters — Emil Ferris (2017)



Carry On

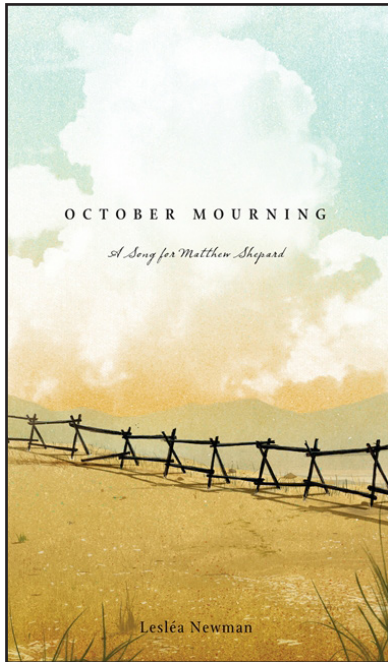
Rainbow Rowell | 2015

This novel has its origins in *Harry Potter* fan fiction, and fans of Rowling's series will spot the similarities (a "chosen one" attending a school of magic must save the wizarding world from a dark power with the help of his friends). Simon Snow is in his final year at Watford, a school for magicians. He agrees to help his roommate, a vampire whom he claims to hate, discover the truth about his mother's death while also battling the Humdrum, a force that is zapping the world of magic. The two come to an uneasy truce before finally acknowledging they are in love. Rowell creates a well-developed, magical world in which song lyrics and catchy advertising slogans become the basis for spells.

You may also like:

A Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue — Mackenzie Lee (2017)

History is All You Left Me — Adam Silvera (2017)



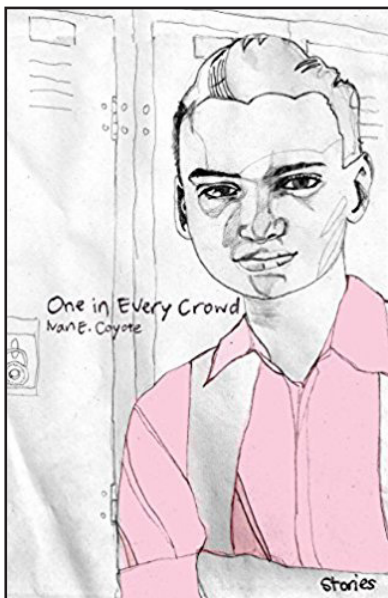
October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard

Lesléa Newman | 2012

In 1998, the brutal murder of gay student Matthew Shepard shocked the small town of Laramie along with the rest of the nation. Shepard was part of a university queer students' group that was organizing a visit from author Lesléa Newman. Newman stated at the time that she intended to complete a project in honor of Matthew. The resulting collection of poems are told from a variety of perspectives including the truck in which Matthew took his final ride, the fence to which he was tied, Matthew's mother, and the girlfriend of one of his killers. Drawing on a number of famous poetic models, Newman plays with structure and voice, crafting an evocative and moving collection that explores the motivations and aftermath of such a horrific event. The poems could be studied independently, as a collection, or alongside other texts.

You may also like:

The Laramie Project — Moises Kaufman (2000)



One in Every Crowd

Ivan E. Coyote | 2005

This is Ivan's eighth book and their first for LGBTQ youth. The short stories in this memoir, deeply personal and wryly emotional, could be read as a collection or stand alone. All explore issues of gender identity to some degree, though some are more direct than others. Coyote explores themes such as fitting in, finding one's identity, kindness in unexpected places, and the small, memorable moments that shape our existence. Many of the stories could be used as mentor texts for personal response writing. Some stories contain graphic language.