



The Wonderful Thing

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Paul Magrs on teen gay fiction.

When a young person realizes that s/he is or may be gay, the experience is often one of intense loneliness ? as though s/he were the only person in the world in this often difficult and confusing situation. So what is it like to write a semi-autobiographical novel about a young gay person? **Paul Magrs**, author of **Strange Boy**, explains.<!--break-->

I want to start with a quotation from Tigger the Tiger, who asserted that, undoubtedly, the most wonderful thing about being him was that: ?I'm the only one. Yes! I'm the oooooonly one!?. That (or variations thereof) happens to be one of the most often recurring lines in the novels I've been reading in connection with this article. I think I used a version of the line in my own book, **Strange Boy**. The narrator, David, sensing his own oddity, must at some point surmise that he is, indeed, the only one.

The only what? In **Strange Boy**, David doesn't know. He doesn't have the word for it yet. He just knows he's different from most people around him and he's pretty much glad of the fact. It's a mostly autobiographical novel too, and so it's only fair to point out that I'm actually pretty much glad of the fact ? still.

The story of a childhood

In the midst of all the kerfuffle and palaver surrounding the publication of my book in June last year, I really felt that I was the only novelist doing this particular job. By which, I mean, presenting a novel narrated by a ten-year-old child who might well grow up to be gay; who is, in fact, grappling with intimations of his sexuality already. This was PC-ness gone mad, said the Scottish teacher's union. Well-nigh pornographic, claimed various Catholic organisations. Burn it, suggested a Bible-bashing US website. All of these bodies were too appalled to actually read the book. Some even seemed proud that they felt able to condemn it without reading it.

The volume of this interest made me think that, maybe, this kind of thing hadn't been done before. As I had to restate, on TV, on radio, in print: I was just writing the story of my childhood, for an audience of children and teens. Why shouldn't I do so? Who was going to stop me? A touch of that Tiggerish irrepressibility came over me, faced with the front page, shock horror tactics of our glorious tabloids. This was censorship, this was repressive weirdness. And I had to fight it, tigerish tooth and claw.

Not the only one?

But then, lo and behold, I am sent a whole pile of novels by **Books for Keeps** for this article which boast characters who are gay or who might be. I welcome them. Maybe, reading them, it'll be like one of those mythical ?coming out? moments and I'll find a whole community of the like-minded and the similarly oriented. Maybe there are other novelists out there who won't cave in to those who tell us that children shouldn't be allowed to read about people who are gay.

Unequivocal gender choice?

Ted van Lieshout's **Brothers** is a delicate, slim novel of shattering clarity. Here are two brothers who are both secretly gay, and who never tell each other. One, Marius, has died before the book begins. It is Luke who picks up the pieces and reads his brother's diaries. A dialogue between them ensues, in the form of marginalia and perplexed flashbacks. Lieshout's work is translated by Lance Salway, who has a keen ear for English idiom: the book rings true in every sense. The brothers in this book are older than David is in mine; by four or five years. They have the names and the correct words for what they might be. Does this make things any easier for them? Or for the people – especially busy-body critics – who might read it? Can we take the deceptively sophisticated quandaries of the boys more seriously if the boys in question are somewhat older?

‘I could accept this because I actually liked being the way I was. I still felt that I was a really special boy and why would a special boy choose to be ordinary?’

My only quibble with Lieshout's world is that things become rather clear-cut. You like either boys or girls and that feeling, intrinsic and immutable, stays with you. There's no bet-hedging, no equivocation other than that your immediate family unwittingly imposes on you. Now, this allows people to simply regard this as a novel for teens with a gay teen character in it: a ‘coming out’ book. Therefore, useful in its own limited way.

Safely marginalised. I'm more interested in those ambiguous gaps and elisions in novels. Always have been.

Polymorphously perverse

This mention of ambivalence takes us to Francesca Lia Block and **Weetzie Bat**, the first volume of a sequence ‘Dangerous Angels’ featuring her heroine, Weetzie Bat. These are reprinted from the Eighties but, repackaged now, seem entirely of the moment. Maybe that slangy, slackerish LA dialogue has become timeless.

There's a gorgeous haphazardness about Weetzie Bat's adventures with her friends. These are neo-punkish polymorphously perverse* Mall Rats: too old for their years, breathless with the excitement of it all and busily inventing their own lives for themselves. They play with adult toys: Weetzie inherits a fantastic house and fills it with friends and freaks and we get merrily caught up in it all. So where's the moral backlash against the author of this novel? A novel for kids in which the teen heroine leaps into bed with her two gay male pals in order to get herself pregnant?

‘They all just sat there, bolt upright, listening to ‘I Wanna Hold Your Hand’.

‘I feel weird,’ Weetzie said.

‘Me, too,’ Dirk said.

Duck scratched his head.

‘But we want a baby and we love each other,’ Weetzie said.

‘I love you, Weetz. I love you, Dirk,’ Duck said.’

There's something delightful all the way through this book, about the kids' easy acceptance of each others' preferences and fads, sexual and fashionwise. They make no bones about any of it and just get on with having a nice time. It's not exactly High Realism, but it does say quite a bit (in a short time) about being brave and being able to invent your own life. And about having to parent your parents through the changes. Weetzie's dad is a mess and we get to like him despite all his faults. It's interesting to note how many of the parents in these books are messed up in one way or another. Or rather, how many are the still-confused, befuddled products of a fifties childhood (a nicer way of putting it). Not that I'm pointing this up as a feature of parents of gay children in or out of books: it's a feature of many contemporary children's books, from Philip Pullman to Jacqueline Wilson: slightly flakey parents who made it through the Sixties ... only just.

Spicey and sassy

The mention of realism there brings me to the tower blocks and graffiti and piss-stained stairwells of Virginia Euwer Wolff's **True Believer**. There's a verve and honesty about this book, too. A novel all in verse, in a rollicking, streetwise low demotic. It's narrated by LaVaughan, who wants to get educated and get out:

two people in the same dirty building

both going to college

when nobody here ever did that before.?

The tall, frayed stanza's of Wolff's pages look like dirty tower blocks themselves, as we are led from room to room, family to family, and generally get caught up in these intensively-lived lives and all their fraughtness: crack mothers, prostitutes and ... of course, the neighbourhood beautiful skater boy who LaVaughan gets a crush on and who, of course, turns out to be completely queer.

The first thing I saw was the lamplight on the fish tank,

and two people, just their heads

partly hidden by the tank.

Like they were whispering to each other.

I got my eyes to focus and

there was something in my spine pulling me back

but something in my eyes pushing me forward

and I recognized Jody but not the other one,

I only noticed it was a boy.?

Of course, this wonderful, spicy and sassy novel is all from LaVaughan's point of view and so Jody is unreachable to us, as he is to her. He is older, accomplished and out and proud. We don't know anything much about him.

Unknowable and distant

So, while these books bring us the gay male teen heroes, they also make them distant somehow. They put them 'over there'; at a safe distance. In the Lieshout one of them is dead, in Block they are just exotic and crazy, and in Wolff, impossibly romantic and remote. So I'm not quite getting the feeling that I'm in that community that could come under such fire for 'breaking an unspoken children's publishing taboo'. Perhaps the taboo broken is the one that insists any gay character should be to one side, unknowable.

Not centre stage, first person, present tense.

To be centre stage, first person and present tense is to be on the hoof. It is to implicate the reader. For the purposes of that book they, too, are a gay ten-year-old while reading. Does that unsettle them? Isn't reading the most polymorphously perverse* act in the world, anyway?

There's also another problem with these books. They're distanced from us, from me, by location. Wolff and Block in the States, Lieshout in the Netherlands. I want to know what other British writers are doing with this stuff.

I don't believe in Philip Pullman's queer angels for a second.

Really, I have to go back into the past, and say a word for a novel that really, someone ought to reprint.

I'm talking about the novel that I read at thirteen. A teen novel, in the children's section of Newton Aycliffe library. It was David Rees's **In the Tent**, long since out of print. It was a book I read down the Burn, up in the trees, with my best friend. We also read a racey, straight adult novel, and never really saw the difference between them. (Except the straight one was a bit sadistic and nasty. **In the Tent** was kind of cosy and familiar.) It deals with four boys lost on a walking trip in the Lake District: the sensitive boy narrates. There's a sensible one, an athletic leader, a closet-case Spaniard boy and Tim, who lets us in on his fantasies about being around during the Civil War (he's good at history). The whole book is a kind of homoerotic Blair Witch Project. Yet the unseen menace isn't some disembodied maniacal force from the past, but the boys' sneaking suspicions to do with each others' respective bents. It was an electrifying read at thirteen. The first time I read the words 'fuck off' in a novel for people my age. The first time I read a scene like the following:

??You're a queer one, Tim.?

Something in the voice told him it was deliberate, a challenge. Did he dare pick up such a gauntlet? His heart started to flutter, and his stomach heaved. 'Am I?' he croaked. Aaron nodded. Tim picked it up, the very first time since he knew that he was. 'Does it show??'

A liberating moment of drama

It's a novel that's stayed with me. I've never owned a copy. I took it out of Aycliffe library repeatedly, read it outdoors, hid it at home. (To be seen with such a thing! In our culture, apparently, to say something, to read something, is to BE it ... it was too frightening to be caught with such implicating evidence...) The book would have disappeared from the library at the time of Clause 28. Yet I remembered large chunks of it years later. When **Strange Boy** was published I kept saying that the only book the least like it that I could remember from my own growing up was David Rees's **In the Tent**. After reading an interview with me saying that in **Gay Times**, one kindly soul actually sent me a copy of the novel that he still had. (And if he's reading ? many thanks again! It isn't often we can be put back in touch so easily, so clearly, with who we used to be!)

Reading the book again was a curious experience. How much you remember. Whole sentences. They make us who we are. I'm so glad I had that book then. Just that one. And I hope mine is doing the same for others now.

I realised the extent of the impact David Rees had made on me when I came to the passage quoted above. I recalled it as an intense, terrifying, liberating moment of drama. But its impact went even deeper than that. The last three words of that quoted section was the title of the first real novel** I sat down and wrote, at the age of twenty-one.

I was picking up precisely, almost unwittingly, at the very point that he left off.

*Polymorphous perversity is the term used in classic psychoanalytical theory to describe how, in the human infant, sexual wishes are not canalized in any one direction. (S Freud, **Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality** (1905) in **Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol.7, London: Hogarth Press, 1978.**)

****Does it Show** (OP) published in 1997 by Chatto and Windus.

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Books discussed:

Strange Boy, Paul Magrs, Simon & Schuster, 0 689 83657 0, £7.99 pbk

Brothers, Ted van Lieshout, trans. Lance Salway, Collins Flamingo, 0 00 711231 9, £4.99 pbk

Weetzie Bat, Francesca Lia Block, Atom Books, 1 904233 03 1, £5.00 pbk

True Believer, Virginia Euwer Wolff, Faber, 0 571 20742 1, £9.99, 0 571 20702 2, £4.99 pbk

In the Tent, David Rees (OP) was published by Dobson in 1979.

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