

## Getting Up To Speed in GLBTQ Fiction

By Jessica Zellers

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### What is GLBTQ Fiction?

GLBTQ fiction breaks from traditional, heteronormative writing, in which characters are assumed to be heterosexual. GLBTQ books feature characters whose sexual orientations are lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, or uncertain, or characters whose biology or gender identity diverges from the male/female binary. Although cataloged as a genre in Novelist in order to provide an easy access point, GLBTQ fiction is a reading interest that can appear in any fiction or nonfiction genre.

### What happens in a GLBTQ novel?

Typically, a GLBTQ novel will have one or more protagonists or a strong secondary characters of a minority sexual orientation or identity. In some cases, the GLBTQ angle is central to the story or character arc; in other cases, the writer deliberately downplays the character's sexual identity, thereby normalizing it.

### Why do people like to read GLBTQ books?

People who themselves identify as GLBTQ appreciate reading about characters with similar identities. Intentionally or not, the great majority of books exclude characters who have minority sexual orientations or identities; GLBTQ books, in contrast, are inclusive, and can legitimize the experiences of readers who otherwise feel overlooked or ostracized.

But readers do not have to identify as GLBTQ to enjoy GLBTQ books. Cisgender heterosexuals might seek out GLBTQ books to learn about people with different sexual identities. And many times, readers may enjoy a GLBTQ book without regard for the characters' sexual orientations.

### Key Titles:

*Rubyfruit Jungle*

By: Rita Mae Brown

Though Rita Mae Brown is best known for the Mrs. Murphy mysteries, a cozy series where the cat solves the crime, she debuted in 1973 with *Rubyfruit Jungle*, which stands to this day as a lesbian classic. It is the coming-of-age story of Molly Bolt, a fiery beauty who embraces her sexual orientation in a decade that did not look kindly on lesbians.

*Middlesex*

By: Jeffrey Eugenides

One of the few books to put intersexuality front and center, *Middlesex* is an ambitious, complex work of literary fiction, set in both the present and the 1920s. Cal, née Calliope, is born as a female but later discovers that s/he is a biological hermaphrodite, and learns to embrace a masculine gender.

*Hild*

By: Nicola Griffith

Because the historical record of the seventh century is meager, Nicola Griffith felt comfortable giving her protagonist a bisexual orientation: no historical documents said she couldn't love women and men both, after all. This carefully researched novel is the story of the young girl who would go on to become St. Hilda of Whitby in Anglo-Saxon England. Elegantly written, the book offers a fascinating look into the gender norms of the dark ages.

*Brokeback Mountain*

By: Annie Proulx

Even the tradition-steeped Western, where men are men and women are women, can adapt to GLBTQ sensibilities. In this tragic literary novella, two cowboys form a relationship that is both sexual and romantic, their marriages to women notwithstanding.

*Star Wars: Aftermath*

By: Chuck Wendig

Science fiction writer Chuck Wendig drew a lot of heat when he dared introduce a gay protagonist to the Star Wars universe. In typical Wendig fashion, however, the focus is not on sexual orientation but on action, with hero Sinjir Rath Velus tracking down Imperial war criminals after the Battle of Endor.

**Key Authors:**

For years, lesbian cartoonist **Alison Bechdel** enjoyed an underground following thanks to her “Dykes to Watch Out For” comic strip, starring an ensemble cast of people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Her erudite understanding of sexual orientation went mainstream, however, with the publication of her critically-acclaimed graphic novel memoir *Fun Home*, the story of her father's closeted homosexuality and possible suicide.

**Dena Hankins** writes steamy romance novels featuring transsexual protagonists. Her settings are atmospheric and richly detailed, and her characters are complicated and multi-faceted. Try *Heart of the Lilikoï*, set in Hawaii and starring Kerala, who normally prefers women, and Ravi, the trans man she falls in love with.

Though he died in 2009, **E. Lynn Harris** endures in popularity. A pioneer for his willingness to write about gay and bisexual black men, Harris examined modern American life in novels such as *No One in the World*, about an attorney who keeps his sexual orientation secret.

**J. L. Langley** writes in a variety of genres, from romance and erotica to science fiction and fantasy. What all her books have in common, however, is a romance between engaging, sensual gay male characters, depicted in sizzling detail. The first in her *Sci-Regency* series is *My Fair Captain*, mixing space travel, political intrigue, an unmarried prince, and an earl with a mysterious past.

Literary *tour de force* **Alice Walker** returns to themes of sexuality, sexual orientation, and race in her novels and poems. She is best known for *The Color Purple*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, featuring a young woman who discovers hope and independence by entering a relationship with an older woman.

## How do I help fans of GLBTQ Writing?

Many readers may be shy or embarrassed to ask for GLBTQ books. You may need to use your intuition or make an educated guess as to what they want. They can always decline your GLBTQ suggestion, if you guess wrong; if you guess right, you'll save them from awkward feelings and build trust.

Avoid open-ended questions, which put the burden on readers to describe what they want. Instead, ask specific questions, such as "Would you like to read about a lesbian main character?" or "Are you interested in learning more about transsexuals?"

## A few more tips:

- Although GLBTQ books are a reading interest, not a genre, the normal rules of readers' advisory apply. The goal is still to find a book with the reader's favorite appeal characteristics (character, setting, pacing, etc.), but with the added GLBTQ element.
- Some readers want GLBTQ stories where relationships are the focus, in which case you'll want to look for love stories, romance novels, or erotica. Other readers want GLBTQ characters or themes, but without the focus on relationships.
- Some of the best GLBTQ books are written for young adult audiences. Ask your adult readers if they'd be interested in classic YA titles such as *Keeping You a Secret* or *Grasshopper Jungle*.
- Although GLBTQ fiction is a reading interest, it is cataloged as a genre in NoveList. Searching by GX GLBTQ fiction will get great results. Keyword searching also works well. The metadata for a book almost always mentions minority sexual orientations and identities.

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