



**Isolation, Exploration, Affirmation:
Dominant Patterns in Four Books for Gay Teens**
—Heather Milne

Bach, Tamara. *Girl from Mars*. Trans. Shelley Tanaka. Toronto: Greenwood, 2008. 180 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 978-0888998258. Print.

Harris, Michael. *Homo*. Toronto: Lorimer, 2012. 142 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 978-1459401914. Print.

Ryan, Tom. *Way to Go*. Victoria: Orca, 2012. 214 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 978-1459800779. Print.

Sobat, Gail Sidonie. *Chance to Dance for You*. Winnipeg: Great Plains, 2011. 172 pp. \$14.95 pb. ISBN 978-1926531113. Print.

In a 1995 article published in *GLQ*, anthropologist Kath Weston explores the role of urban spaces in the construction of a “sexual imaginary” through which queer subjects find comfort, community, and a sense of self in the context of a move from a rural, small-town, or suburban environment to a large urban centre. Weston notes that the narrative of gay migration to the city functions as “the odyssey of escape from the isolation of the countryside and the surveillance of small town life to the freedom and anonymity of the urban landscape,” and as she suggests, the valorization of urban environments in opposition to rural and small-

town settings is “embedded in the gay subject” (274). The claustrophobia of small towns and suburbs seems to be a typical, if not stereotypical, feature of narratives written for and about gay teenagers. Each of the four books reviewed here is set in a small town or an outlying suburb of a major city. In these four narratives, urban centres are seen as almost mythic spaces and as privileged sites of sexual and self-exploration, whereas small towns and suburbs are represented as restrictive sites of surveillance, bullying, and heteronormativity. Although the narrative of urban migration is a compelling one in queer culture and functions as an

overwhelmingly dominant trope in queer literature, as Judith Halberstam reminds us, the conflation of urban spaces with acceptance and community and the depiction of rural and small-town spaces as sites of homophobic violence should be scrutinized for its reliance on fairly simplistic class-based assumptions and for its refusal to account for the existence of rural queers who elect to “stay home in order to preserve their difference” (27). Indeed, the books under review here all replicate, to some degree, a dualism between the gay urban metropolis and the homophobic rural/small-town/suburban setting that becomes a backdrop against which their narratives of self-discovery are constructed. While none of these texts narrates a gay urban migration (all of the protagonists are teenagers still living at home with their parents), a migration to the city is on the horizon for most of these protagonists by the end of each novel. Perhaps predictably, characters who hail from cities tend to function as catalysts for the protagonists’ growth and facilitate their personal and sexual development.

This dynamic is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Tim Ryan’s *Way to Go*. The story is set in 1994 in Deep Cove, a small town on Cape Breton Island. Danny, the protagonist, is a closeted high-school student whose world opens up when he begins to work for Denise, his mother’s high-school friend who has returned to the town to open a restaurant after living for many years in Vancouver, New York, and Montreal. Denise left Deep Cove after finishing high school because she felt she

could not live there openly as a lesbian, but a recent breakup has precipitated her return. Accompanying Denise to Deep Cove is J. P. (a chef from Montreal) and Lisa (a young woman from New York who has come to waitress at the restaurant). These three characters expand Danny’s horizons: J. P. teaches him to cook, Lisa shares her knowledge of music by making Danny mix tapes, and Denise models for Danny how he can be comfortable in his own queer skin. None of these urban figures functions as an object of sexual desire or an occasion for sexual exploration (sex is mostly absent from this narrative). Instead, the three supporting characters open a psychic and social space for Danny to begin to explore his identity outside of the conventional codes of heteronormativity and masculinity that are embodied by Danny’s childhood friend Kierce and by Danny’s father, who commutes from Cape Breton to Alberta to work in the Oil Patch. Over the course of the narrative, Danny gains the self-confidence to distance himself from Kierce and begins to accept his sexuality. The novel ends with Danny making plans to attend a prestigious cooking school in Montreal where, presumably, he will come out. For the time being, however, he is happy where he is. The novel ends with Danny walking on the beach with his family and reflecting, “I had all the time in the world to be somebody different, somewhere else. Right now, the way I saw it, I was right where I was supposed to be” (214). As its title suggests, the book narrates a kind of



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journey-in-progress. Danny is inching out of the closet but still has some distance to travel in order to find his way. *Way to Go* is a fairly conventional coming-of-age story, one that is tame, even conservative, in its treatment of sex and sexuality. Danny maintains a kind of wide-eyed innocence that reminds readers that he is essentially from another time; the book is set prior to the widespread accessibility of Internet porn, chat rooms, online dating sites, and iTunes. As a reader close in age to the author of this book, I detect a note of nostalgia in its pages for a bygone era when teenagers exchanged mix tapes with collage covers and smuggled their fathers' soft-core porn mags into their forts in the woods. This nostalgia may not transfer that effectively to contemporary adolescent readers, even those living in small towns like Deep Cove who would likely be perplexed by the degree to which Danny is sheltered not only from the world of gay sex and sexuality but also from the culinary, musical, and cultural influences that characters like J. P. and Lisa bring to the novel.

Will, the protagonist of Michael Harris's *Homo*, lives in Chilliwack, a bedroom community about forty-five minutes from Vancouver. Will is out to his parents and friends, all of whom are fine with his sexual orientation. His struggle is one of self-acceptance and self-discovery. His internalized homophobia manifests as a repudiation of the flamboyancy of his gay classmate Daniel and the cultivation of a conventionally masculine appearance. Will embarks on a sexual relationship with Riley, a slightly older man from Vancouver whom he meets through an online dating site, and his world expands as he begins to hang out with Riley and his friends. Riley is HIV-positive but does not tell Will until after they have sex. In spite of the fact that Riley's viral

count is low and the likelihood of transmission is slim, Will is angry with Riley and ends the relationship. As Will is coping with this situation, Daniel is hospitalized after attempting suicide. Rather than distancing himself from Daniel as he has done in the past, Will confronts the bullies who have harassed Daniel and gets into a fist fight with one of them. *Homo* is essentially a story about a gay teenager learning to become comfortable with himself and to be more accepting of others. At the end of the story, Will partially reconciles with Riley as they hang out with friends at Wreck Beach, a nude beach in Vancouver that is a popular cruising spot for gay men. Will receives word that he has been accepted to the University of British Columbia and is making plans to move to the city to attend the school. Coincidentally, Wreck Beach is located on the UBC campus, suggesting that a vibrant gay culture will be accessible to him there.

Homo is published as part of Lorimer's SideStreets series, which, according to the website of the publisher, consists of "edgy, fast-paced novels that combine real-world themes and believable characters" and are written for "reluctant readers" ("Children"). A quick search of the Lorimer website reveals that other SideStreets books deal with issues like gang violence, teen suicide, and stalking; homosexuality is presented in this context as a difficult, gritty, and slightly sensationalistic issue. Since *Homo* is written for and marketed to reluctant readers, the story and vocabulary are simple and direct, and

issues rather than language drive the novel. The books in this series are designed to look edgy; they feature black and white photographs as cover art and the titles are printed in a highly visible bold red font. The cover of *Homo* features a close-up photograph of two men holding hands. With its garish cover and cheap paper, the book recalls, likely unintentionally, the legacy of homophobic lesbian and gay pulp paperbacks from the 1950s and 1960s. Given the degree of homophobic bullying in many high schools, I wonder how many closeted teenage readers would feel comfortable being seen buying *Homo*, checking it out of the library, or reading it in a public setting. I suspect many of the intended readers of the book, particularly those who might benefit most from *Homo*, might shy away from reading a book that announces itself in the way that this one does.

Girl from Mars by Tamara Bach, originally published in 2003 in Germany under the title *Marsmädchen*, was translated into English by Shelley Tanaka. Bach's novel won several prizes in Germany, including the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis (German Youth Literature Prize) for best youth book in 2004. *Girl from Mars* is the only book in this review that features a lesbian rather than a gay male character, and it is arguably the most complex and best written of the four books. The story is set in a small town in Germany, but the action could take place anywhere. Miriam, the protagonist and first-person narrator, repeatedly describes herself as average:

I am Miriam. Fifteen. Blonde. Brown eyes, average weight. Daughter, sister, person who sits beside you at school.

I'm Miriam. I'm tired, and that's it. No more, no less. Ordinary. (12)

Miriam's ordinary existence is shaken when she falls in love with a new classmate, Laura. When her brother confronts her about her relationship with Laura and expresses his concern because he has heard Laura is a lesbian, Miriam replies: "Now I can tell you. Laura is from another planet. She is from Mars, and you know what? She's brainwashed me. And in exactly one month they plan to invade the earth. And I'm going to help them do that. That way I won't be eliminated" (130). Miriam's sarcastic reply to her brother symbolically severs her identification with the ordinary and allows her to explore the extraordinary through her affair with Laura. Miriam's realization of her feelings for Laura develops slowly against the backdrop of the constrictive, heteronormative values embodied by her friend Suse and the small town in which they live. Miriam and Laura first have sex not in their small town but during a weekend trip to a larger city, confirming the assumption, shared to some degree by all four of these books, that cities function as sites of freedom and sexual exploration for queer characters. Miriam and Laura have a brief but intense affair that ends abruptly when Laura leaves town suddenly and without explanation to live with her father

in Cologne.

Bach is a skilful writer who presents these adolescent characters as complex and convincing; she also avoids talking down to her readers or moralizing. There is a marked absence of adult figures in this book. Parents exist in the shadows and the main characters have a great deal of autonomy, cooking their own meals and taking trains to cities seemingly without parental involvement. Also absent from the book are cellphones, Facebook, and the Internet, reminding readers that in the decade since this book was written, the platforms teenagers use to communicate have changed markedly.

The absence of cellphones and social networking in teenagers' lives in *Girl from Mars* is especially noticeable when this text is compared to Gail Sidonie Sobat's *Chance to Dance for You*, a novel in which the characters' contact with one another is in large part mediated through text messages, Facebook, and YouTube. This book is extremely effective in its exploration of the ways in which these new technologies function as instruments of communication, bullying, and control for teenagers, and Sobat writes about these dimensions of teen life convincingly and compellingly.

Like Bach, Sobat conflates the geographic community in which the novel is set with a normativity and homogeneity that the gay protagonist finds restrictive and ethically suspect; in this case, these values are attached to the generic but affluent suburb in which Ian lives: "And in the little town-city that wishes

it were a big city are all the shops and restaurants you'd find anywhere else in North America. A tidy strip runs straight through Turid Park, dividing it into east and west. And on the tidy strip is the Canadian Tire, the A&W, the mighty golden arches, the Mr. Lube, the Shell and Esso and Petrocan, all vying for your dollar to fill up any one of your two cars and one SUV so we can all go merrily along raising the global temperature" (6). The depiction in the novel of the monotony of Canadian suburbia is convincing, even if it does tend to pit the restrictive suburbs against a liberatory gay urban imaginary that is, as I have argued, a simplistic yet shared feature of many LGBTQ coming-of-age narratives.

Where the book falls short is in its tendency to reduce its characters to stereotypes. Ian, the gay male protagonist, is a promising ballet dancer who is in a secret sexual relationship with a closeted star football player named Jess. Jess functions as what Thomas Crisp, in a discussion of the Rainbow Boys trilogy (which features gay male teenage characters), has called the "Tragic Gay Jock" or T. G. J., "a 'masculine' young man whose status as an attractive star allows him to discover his sexuality" at the expense of both his girlfriend and his boyfriend (226). Ian fits the stereotype Crisp identifies as the "Sympathetic Understanding Doormat" or S. U. D., a boy who is also an athlete but whose chosen sport or physical activity (in this case ballet) does not carry the same masculine privilege as football or hockey. "The S. U. D. embodies many of

the same stereotypical and troublesome characteristics traditionally assigned in literature to females: he is emotional, sensitive, and willing to put his own needs secondary to those of the dominant male" (228). The book adheres closely to these stereotypes, which do little to disrupt the status quo of homophobic representation.

Ian becomes involved in choreographing an elaborate flash mob that he and some of his peers are producing as a grad fundraiser. Rogers Communications (a large Canadian telecommunications company) has agreed to sponsor the event on the condition that the young people involved use Rogers cellphones to advertise the Rogers network as they record the spectacle. During the successful execution of this event, Ian gets caught up in the moment and lip-synchs the lyrics to Avril Lavigne's "Girlfriend" to his closeted lover. This public declaration of his feelings finds its way to YouTube and results in Ian being badly beaten by members of Jess's football team. Jess publically distances himself from Ian and does nothing to defend his secret boyfriend. Ian must defer his audition for the National Ballet School in Toronto due to his considerable injuries while a still-closeted Jess joins the army. Jess's heterosexual privilege remains intact at the end of the story, and the only retribution he receives for his betrayal is Ian's refusal to respond to his text message apologies and decision to break things off with him (suggesting, perhaps, that Ian is not a total S. U. D.).

Chance to Dance for You is a timely book in its focus on social media and technology as sites of bullying for gay teens, a topic that has been in the news of late due to a proliferation of highly publicized teen suicides and the popularity of the “It Gets Better” campaign, which attempts to offer a sense of hope to depressed and isolated teenagers.

Both *Girl from Mars* and *Chance to Dance for You* have somewhat unhappy endings; the promise that it will “get better” is deferred for Miriam and Ian. These books might be said to follow in a tradition of texts about what Sara Ahmed refers to as the “unhappy queer,” a figure whom she encourages us to embrace rather than repudiate. The unhappy ending to the queer text is, for Ahmed, a “political gift” in part because this was the condition under which queer fiction could be published in the early to mid-twentieth century. From the melancholic protagonist of Radcliffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* to the doomed butches of 1950s and 1960s pulp paperback novels, queer characters often end up alone at the end of the story. All four of the protagonists in the books under review here also end up alone at the end of the narrative. If these novels are any indication, in the world of young adult queer literature, protagonists are allowed to have sex but relationships must ultimately be fleeting. It would, however, be misleading to place these texts in the same league of misery as a novel like *The Well of Loneliness*. In many respects, these are affirmative if formulaic narratives of

self-discovery since they all feature protagonists who reach a place of acceptance after a struggle and early sexual encounters constitute steps along this journey rather than destinations.

That said, I am vaguely unsettled by aspects of the narrative of progress, self-discovery, and acceptance that each of these books follows. In addition to the fact that these narratives tend to be rather predictable, they also sanitize some of the harsher lived realities of queer youth, who are at a much higher risk of suicide, homelessness, and substance abuse than their heterosexual counterparts. All four of these narratives focus on white, middle-class, cisgender and (for the most part) male protagonists with relatively stable home lives. The narrative of progress, inclusion, and self-acceptance, it seems, is restricted to protagonists who are cushioned by some degree of privilege. None of the narratives is seriously complicated by the challenges that poverty, racial or cultural diversity, an unstable home life, domestic, physical, or sexual abuse, or a less than straightforward presentation of gender might introduce. When these issues are addressed, they are problems in the lives of secondary characters and never in the life of the protagonist. The relatively formulaic structure of these stories cannot accommodate the complexities that such dimensions might introduce to the narrative, even though many queer youth—and arguably those most in need of affirmative narratives—have to contend with these issues in addition to facing

the challenge of coming out. This is not a criticism of any of these books on an individual level but may reflect a lack of diversity in gay teen fiction in general. It

is important to recognize the possibilities foreclosed by these narratives as much as we celebrate the doors they open.

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