New LGBTQ Picture Books for Back-to-School

by Dana Rudolph | drudolph@mombian.com
contribution writer

For back-to-school time, here are some new and soon-to-be-published picture books with LGBTQ and gender creative characters, all involving schools and classmates.

What Riley Wore, by Elana K. Arnold and illustrated by Linda Davick (Simon & Schuster), is the winsome tale of a child who delights in playing dress up. On the first day of school, Riley (whose gender is never stated) wears a bunny outfit. Rather than making Riley an object of ridicule, Riley’s soft bunny ears comfort a classmate who was crying.

We then see Riley around the neighborhood and at school, switching between a ball gown, a hard hat and overalls, a tutu, and more—outfits that elicit praise from other children and Riley’s teacher.

At one point, another child asks, “Are you a girl or a boy?” and Riley simply answers “Today I’m a firefighter. And a dancer,” and several other fanciful things. The other child responds, “Want to play?” Arnold refreshingly conveys a message of acceptance without raising issues, but too often the only narrative told about children expressing gender creativity. The completely positive outlook makes this book stand out.

In Ogilvy, by Deborah Underwood (Henry Holt), the titular and gender ambiguous bunny is excited about meeting other children in a new town. Ogilvy’s medium-length garment confuses them, however, and they tell Ogilvy, “Bunnies in dresses play ball and knit socks,” but “Bunnies in sweaters make art and climb rocks.”

Underwood smartly doesn’t divide the activities here along traditional gender lines, helping readers see the absurdity of such divisions. Ogilvy relabels the outfit at will and plays accordingly, until one day the other bunnies demand a fixed choice.

Ogilvy finds self-confidence, speaks out, and convinces the other bunnies that everyone benefits from wearing and doing what they choose. The rhymes have a clear echo of Dr. Seuss and T. L. McBeth’s simple illustrations evoke Mo Willems, but the story blends its influences into an original tale whose combination of message and merriment should find many fans.

More heavy handed is Dazzling Travis: A Story About Being Confident and Original, by Hannah Carmona Dias and illustrated by Brenda Figueroa (Cardinal Rule Press). “Dresses and armor: Pink, black, or green. I pretend I’m a knight, a king or a queen,” proclaims Travis, a young Black boy.

“Terrible things are happening outside. At any time of night and day, poor helpless people are being dragged out of their homes.... Families are torn apart; men, women, and children are separated. Children come home from school to find that their parents have disappeared.”

This is not from Mississippi in August 2019 but Anne Frank in Amsterdam in January 1943. As some assure themselves it can’t happen here, 11-year-old Magdalena Gomez Gregorio pleads on television for her father’s release from ICE detention.

BuzzFeed News reports, “A Vegas Man Was Arrested For Plotting A White Supremacist Attack On An LGBTQ Bar Or Synagogue.” Trump’s unrelenting hate rhetoric increases the likelihood of more massacres like the ones in Orlando and Pittsburgh. In the recent massacre in El Paso he grins and gives a thumbs-up while posing with an infant whose parents died shielding him from the shooter. His regime continues attacking transgender rights as hate crimes rise. In Dayton, the victims include the shooter’s trans brother.

In a marriage of idiocy and cynicism, Walmart is removing its violent video game displays but continuing to sell guns. This is the right’s response to the proliferation of assault weapons on our streets.

Denial is rampant, as with white people who complain about being reminded of slavery during plantation tours. Perhaps we can chat over coffee about which artifacts should

Rhode Island to add gender-neutral option for licenses

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP)—Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo says the state will begin offering a gender-neutral option for residents to put on their driver’s licenses and birth certificates.

Rhode Island will join the ranks of about a dozen other states already offering an option of “X” instead of the standard “M” or “F.”

The option is in response to the governor’s conversations with the transgender and LGBTQ community.

The Democratic governor says this is “just basic fairness” in order to ensure all residents are being recognized for who they are.

The Rhode Island Division of Motor Vehicles and the Department of Health echoed the governor’s remarks.

The governor adds that the biggest hurdle has been the implementation of the change.

Residents could potentially see the option available within a year.
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Baptist college kicks out transgender student after surgery

GALLATIN, Tenn. (AP)—A 21-year-old transgender man says his private Tennessee college kicked him out after he got breast reduction surgery.

Yanna Awrey tells the Tennessean that his Baptist missionary parents wanted him to attend Wake Forest University, previously known as the Free Will Baptist Bible College. He says he was ousted to school officials, who ordered him to conceal his gender identity and attend Christian therapy.

He started transitioning this spring, and says he thought everything would be OK if he kept the surgery secret.

But student services Vice President Jon Forlines emailed Awrey the day of the surgery saying Awrey couldn’t return to student housing. The school paid for a weekend in a hotel, then brought Awrey before a disciplinary committee that cited a “sexual perversion” rule for the suspension.

Awtrey before a disciplinary committee that cited a “sexual perversion” rule for the suspension. The surgery secret.

Awtrey couldn’t return to student housing. The school paid for a weekend in a hotel, then brought Awtrey before a disciplinary committee that cited a “sexual perversion” rule for the suspension.

"I heard that 34-year-old Dominick Archfield is being held in the Charleston County jail.

North Charleston Deputy Police Chief Scott Deckard says Archfield is accused of shooting to death Denali Berries Stuckey. The 29-year-old transgender North Carolina woman was found on a roadside on July 20.

Deckard told the newspaper that Stuckey’s killing has not been classified as a hate crime, but remains under investigation.

Chase Glenn, the executive director of the Alliance for Full Acceptance in North Charleston, said violence against black transgender women is becoming a crisis.


South Carolina man held in transgender woman’s killing

CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP)—Police in South Carolina say a man has turned himself in to face a murder charge for the killing of a transgender woman.

The Post and Courier of Charleston is reporting that the Gloucester County School Board’s policy required Grimm, a transgender male, to use girls’ restrooms or private bathrooms. The judge wrote that Grimm’s rights were violated under the U.S. Constitution’s equal protection clause as well as under Title IX, the federal policy that protects against gender-based discrimination.

“T(here is no question that the Board’s policy discriminates against transgender students on the basis of their gender nonconformity,” Allen wrote.

“Under the policy, all students except for transgender students may use restrooms corresponding with their gender identity,” she continued. “Transgender students are singled out, subjected to discriminatory treatment, and excluded from spaces where similarly situated students are permitted to go.”

Allen’s ruling requires the school board to update the gender on Grimm’s high school transcripts.

The judge also acknowledged that the board had the “undeniable responsibility” of navigating challenges that were unimaginable a generation ago.

“Under this case, I have no doubt that all involved in this case have the best interests of the students at heart,” Allen added.

Grimm graduated in 2017 from Gloucester High School, located in a mostly rural area east of 60 miles (95 kilometers) east of Richmond and near the Chesapeake Bay. Now 20 and living in California, he said by phone that the judge’s order was “beautiful.”

Grimm said he felt a sense of relief but would continue to fight the case if the school board appeals.

“My case has given me something of a platform that I intend to use, as long as I have it available to me, for trans education and advocacy,” he added.

David Corrigan, the attorney for the Gloucester County School Board, declined to comment in an email to The Associated Press.

Corrigan had argued in court last month that Grimm remained female. He said gender is not a “societal construct” and that it doesn’t matter that Grimm underwent chest reconstruction surgery and hormone therapy.

The judge’s ruling will likely strengthen similar claims of discrimination made by students in eastern Virginia. It could have a greater impact if the case goes to an appeals court that oversees Maryland, West Virginia and the Carolinas.

Allen’s ruling joins others that have been favorable to transgender students in states that include Maryland, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. But differing policies are still in place in schools across the country, said Harper Jean Tobin, policy director for the National Center for Transgender Equality, speaking last month with the AP.

Gary McCaleb, senior counsel for the conservative Christians group Alliance Defending Freedom, said last month that the issue is far from resolved.
New Jersey shore mayor criticizes LGBT curriculum

BARNEGAT TOWNSHIP, N.J. (AP)—The Republican mayor of a small New Jersey town is urging residents to oppose a state law that requires middle and high schools to instruct students on the contributions of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people.

Barnegat Township Mayor Alfonso Cirulli on Tuesday called the LGBT political movement “an affront to Almighty God.”

The Asbury Park Press reports the 60-year-old former assistant principal opened the township committee by urging residents to pressure Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy and the Legislature to reverse the law that was signed on Jan. 31. Cirulli said the government “has no right to teach our kids morality.”

Cirulli said “we’ve crossed over the line into absurdity.”


Restaurant to pay $40,000 in pact over gay server’s harassment

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (AP)—A Virginia restaurant operator has agreed to pay $40,000 to resolve a lawsuit that claims its employees routinely harassed a gay server with homophobic epithets and taunted him about his sexuality.

A federal judge on Thursday signed off on the settlement between the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Mejia Corp., which does business as El Tio Tex-Mex Grill restaurant in Gainesville.

The commission’s September 2018 lawsuit claimed restaurant employees also harassed the gay server’s heterosexual friend, a busser, based on their friendship.

The settlement calls for the server and his friend to split the $40,000 payments from the company. The agreement also bars the restaurant from engaging in or condoning sex-based harassment of any employee.

An attorney for the company didn’t immediately respond to an email seeking comment Saturday.

Rainbow flag at reception

HOMEWOOD, Ala. (AP)—Police in Alabama have identified a man accused of leaving a threatening letter at a business that had displayed a rainbow flag.

News outlets report Homewood police obtained an arrest warrant Wednesday for 83-year-old James Wil-oughby Wood. The note was found last month on the back door of Salon U.

AL.com reports Homewood police Sgt. John Carr says Wood will be charged with misdemeanor harassing communication once he’s arrested. Carr says detectives haven’t made contact with Wood and don’t know the motive behind the letter.

Homewood detectives reviewed surveillance video to identify the person responsible. Wood was picked from a police lineup.

Isam Bajalia owns the salon and says he and other workers had just returned from New York City’s World Pride event when the letter was found.
Some of his classmates, however, nastily tell him that boys and girls must each play with different things. A few others, who express gender creativity themselves, remain silent. Travis summons his courage and explains to the bullies, over several pages, why they are wrong. "It's not weird or strange to express the true you," he concludes. The message is good, but it's a bit pedantic, and many of the rhymes feel forced.

At the end there are short bios of several real people who "struggled against the opinions of others," including 19th-century baseball player Elizabeth Stride, dancer Fernando Bujones, designer Coco Chanel, and writer Langston Hughes. More contemporary choices might resonate better with likely readers (and Chanel's connections with Nazis make her a dubious choice). Still, many may appreciate Travis' self-confidence in the face of bullying (not to mention his dazzlling style).

Sam!, by Dani Gabriel (Penny Candy Books), with illustrations by Robert Liu-Trujillo, is the tale of a nine-year-old transgender boy "filled with dreams and spirit and laughter." After he hears another boy in his class say "Boys are born a certain way and girls are born a certain way," however, he is sad and scared. He confides in his older sister Maggie that he's not a girl like people think, but a boy. "Was I born wrong?" he asks.

Maggie assures him otherwise. She supports him at school and encourages him to tell their parents. They immediately accept him, but also acknowledge they all have a lot to learn together. More than anything, though, their pride in him shines through. Some kids tease him, but with Maggie's support, he continues to play, succeed in school, and dream.

Sam and his family could be read as Latino and they live in a racially diverse neighborhood. Robert Liu-Trujillo's soft watercolor illustrations bring the characters' emotions in this warm story of sibling support and family love.

In My Footprints, by Bao Phi and illustrated by Basia Tran (Capstone), a Vietnamese American girl finds solace in nature and in her imagination after being teased by classmates about her two moms and her ethnic origins. "Momma Arti and Momma Ngoc join her in pretending, "because we're stronger together." Momma Ngoc suggests a phoenix, which we learn in an afterward has both Eastern and Western origins, just like Momma Ngoc. Momma Arti suggests the "part lion, part bird" Sarabha from her Hindu heritage. Thuy then makes up her own creature—one that is "both a boy and a girl" and whose skin changes "from black to light brown to lighter and back to black—not to hide, but because it always wants to be different shades of pretty." One could buy the book for that empowering line alone.

Phi, a poet and author whose awards include a Caldecott Honor and an Ezra Jack Keats Honor, has crafted a lyrical tale about the power of imagination and finding strength in family and cultural heritage. It's also notable as one of few LGBTQ-inclusive picture books to focus on Asian characters. Consider this a must-have for any LGBTQ kids' collection.

For more LGBTQ back-to-school resources, see my annual list at mombian.com.

Dana Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian (mombian.com), a GLAAD Media Award-winning blog and resource directory for LGBTQ parents.
La Cage still resonates

By Jules Becker

Could Mike Pence be an American Monsieur Dindon? After all, the anti-gay Vice President of the United States would easily support the Moral Majority positions of the fictional homophobic French politician in the acclaimed 1983 musical “La Cage Aux Folles” (1984 Tony).

Put another way, the defense of diversity in the show—specifically the lifetime love and coupling of Georges and Albin—resonates as much today in America and elsewhere as it did when the musical first dazzled Boston in tryout and later Broadway.

Now Reagle Music Theatre is closing a Jerry Herman-friendly summer season—that began with a solid revival of “Mame” with Leigh Barrett triumphant in the title role—with a high-stepping and appealing edition of “La Cage Aux Folles.”

Based on the French play by Jean Poiret, the Jerry Herman (score)-Harvey Fierstein (book) collaboration smartly provides ‘Legend of the Riviera’ Albin, Zaza on stage, with a properly show-stopping solo “I Am What I Am”—that doubles as an unabashed anthem of pride for the gay headline as well as a general declaration of sexual and emotional honesty.

Early on, of course, straight Jean-Michel pleads with his father to reign in Albin’s flamboyance in order to conceal their orientation from Dindon and assure his marriage to daughter Anne. Ultimately, the union of Georges and Albin stands poignantly strong free of apologists and rich with their mutual love and understanding.

Along the way humor and high energy blend with real feeling. Les Cageaux, the dancers who surround Zaza at the title drag club, slither in the original feathered and shimmering costume design of Matthew Wright and attain full integrity in onstage routines and brief offshore exchanges.

Stage managing Francis requires a neck brace and a sling to cope with the sadism of whip-resembling dance sequences. Essential to any satisfying revival is a very dynamic Albin, and James Darrah more than fills the bill. Big-voiced Darrah builds the show-stopping “I Am What I Am” from initial candor to fiery dignity. He brings full conviction to wary diva Zaza and understated bravery to Albin as a parent and spouse.

J.T. Turner finds Georges’ sense of responsibility as club impresario and his emotional depth—the latter especially when Georges gives insight to Jean-Michel about Albin’s parenting. Darrah and Turner have the right wistfulness on the love duet “Song On the Sand.”

Benz Anthakarunpan catches Jacob’s gusto in donning a full spectrum of getups and his embrace of every adventure that comes his way. Jonathan Acorn persuasively evolves from judgmental to understanding as Jean-Michel. Lily Steven has Anne’s fairness and sweetness.

Rich Allegretto is properly tight lipped as Dindon but could do with more attitude. David Allen Jeffrey’s scenic design catches the tastefulness of Georges and Albin’s home in the early going but could do with more phallic and gay motifs to make the second act monastic transformation (to please the Dindons) more pronounced and amusing.

The best of times will have arrived when all people—gay and straight—live in harmony with each other and their respective differences. “La Cage Aux Folles” is a tuneful call for that harmony—one which Darrah and the Reagle cast give impassioned expression.
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Greetings from Casablanca. With this endless odyssey coming to a close, I’m making my virgin trip to Africa—although I’m certainly not leaving a virgin. To be honest, I don’t think of myself as a whore. Then again, I also don’t think of myself as 50! But during this trip, I spent a good amount of time with a good-looking, single heterosexual man who is in his early 40s. He was having a dalliance with a girl he met in a bar. I guess you could say all of the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walked into his (sorry, I couldn’t resist). After a few days, he confessed to me that this local was his seventh sexual partner. “Ever!” I asked incredulously. “Yes, isn’t that a lot!” I was the wrong person to ask—I had more sexual partners just going through Customs!

Lest we think all straight men are as chaste as my companion, I just read a story about a prominent Republican leader who tested a prospective female paramour saying that he’dchoke her if they had a sexual encounter—and he didn’t mean with his hands. In an ironic twist, the same thing happened to me in Customs!

Tennessee State Representative Bill Sanderson just resigned after it was revealed that he was looking to hook up with men 40 years his junior on Grindr. Now, look—who are we to judge? A single gay man looking for sex is OK with me. Oh, wait—he’s not single and doesn’t identify as gay. In fact, he campaigned as fiercely pro-life and pro-family. In yet another ironic twist, Sanderson has a gay son who is in a long-term relationship. So I guess they’re both pro-family; just different kinds of family. When it came to his resignation, Bill said he would be “spending time with my dear wife, Marijie.” Leave it to a gay man to find out about a certain age to mention “my little Marijie.”

If you know one thing about me—other than the fact that I’m apparently a big whore—it’s that I loves me a scandalous priest story. So, my ears perks up when I heard about Rev. Dr. William Weaver, a Presbyterian minister from New Jersey. He claims that when he gave three young men blow jobs during “counseling sessions”, he was trying to suck the demons out of them! I must have missed that passage in the Bible—perhaps it was in the long-suppressed Book of Fellations. According to a “Newswear” exposé, Weaver had the young men take off their clothes and lay down, face up. He placed an angel coin on their heads and sacred stones on their hands and ankles before performing oral sex on them. When the church learned of this “misconduct”, they defrocked Rev. Dr. Weaver and relocated him to a retirement community! Needless to say, his victims are now pressing charges.

Then there’s the story about the bishop from Cyprus. The Most Reverend Metropolitan Neophytos Masouras of Morphou of the Church of Cyprus said the following: “Homosexualitiy is a problem transferred to a fetus, when a pregnant woman has anal sex and enjoys it.” Is there any scientific data that can back up (or so to speak) this claim? Regardless, let this be a lesson to you—whenever you have anal sex, don’t enjoy it TOO much!

During this trip, I spent quite a bit of time in Rome. You know who else was there? Kevin Spacey. You’d think after getting off (not necessarily literally) in Nantucket, he’d be laying low. But no, he tipped off the press that he’d be at the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme museum near the bronze statue of Bocner at Rest. Once there, Kevin launched into a dramatic recitation of Italian poet Gabriele Tinti’s “The Bocner”. The poem discusses how people used the battered bocner for their amusement and then cast him aside after he outlived his usefulness. The only thing that could have made this spectacle more ridiculous is if he read it in the original Italian. Instead, he opted for what I consider a pretty stilted English translation, which you can see on BillyMasters.com.

Drama is not foreign to Broadway. But a recent performance of “To Kill a Mockingbird” had more than its share. The show ended prematurely when gunshots were heard and audience members panicked. Cast member Gideon Glick Tweeted: “Stopped our show tonight due to a motorcycle backfire that was mistaken for a bomb or a shooting. Screaming civilians tried to storm our theater for safety. Audience started screaming and the cast fled the stage.”

If you want some real queer theatre, you’re in luck. Jinkx Monsoon and Ginger Minj have been cast in a touring production of the musical “Xanadu”. They will be playing the heroine’s sister muses, which sounds like perfect casting to me—on Broadway they were played by the fabulous Mary Testa and Jackie Hoffman. The tour kicks off on September 27th at the Pullo Center in York, PA. You can get details and tickets at XanaduThExtour.com.

Remember back in 2017 when ABC cancelled plans for a live version of “The Little Mermaid”? It’s now back on and will coincide with the 30th anniversary of the feature film and will air under the banner “The Wonderful World of Disney Presents The Little Mermaid LIVE!” on November 5th. Because we must always have colorblind casting. “Moana” star Auli’i Cravalho will play Ariel, Shaggy will be Sebastian the Crab, and Queen Latifah will assume the role of Ursula. Am I the only one who thinks this live TV version will steal some of the thunder from the recently announced live film version Disney is planning?

The Broadway musical “The Prom”—which is about a lesbian couple who want to attend the prom together—made history by hosting an actual lesbian wedding onstage. Armelle Kay Harper, who is the script coordinator, married Jody Kay Smith. According to reports, audience members were surprised when the real-life wedding happened after the show’s curtain calls. Although it was completely legal, a larger, more traditional ceremony is happening in Smith’s hometown next month.

I know I should be sad to report the breakup of Antoni Porowski from “Queer Eye” and Trace Leehnoff, formerly of “Flipping Out”, but I’m not. Just means two hot guys are once again in play. I also know I should be sad that Liam Hemsworth and Miley have broken up. Sorry—not.

There have been several attempts to bring the story of Liberate to the stage. While none of those projects have made it very far, a new one based on HBO’s “Behind the Candelabra” is being produced by David Permut. He says his ideal Liberase would be Bradley Cooper. ‘Cause when I think of Liberase, I naturally think of Bradley Cooper.

For the time being, Cooper is unavailable to play the piano prodigy because he’s slated to play another formidable musical giant—Leonard Bernstein. Bradley Cooper will play the composer of “West Side Story” (among other things) and also direct the film for Paramount Pictures. He’s also snagged Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese as co-producers. You may recall there was a rival biopic about Bernstein in the works which would have starred Jake Gyllenhaal. Alas, that project stalled when Cooper snagged the exclusive rights to Bernstein’s music from the composer’s family—a decision which was made after he volunteered to co-host a performance of “Candide” alongside Carey Mulligan, who happens to be the frontrunner to play Bernstein’s wife. Clever boy.

Our “Ask Billy” question comes from Grant in Long Beach: “I just saw ‘Booksmart’ and fell in love with Richard Madden. I keep reading he’s gay in real life. So, once and for all, is he or isn’t he?”

Let me answer this question with a seemingly unrelated story. Months ago, I reported that Marvel planned to make a film about their gay superhero, Ikaris—who has complete control over his physical form and never ages. Talk about a gay super-power! It was rumored that the company would only consider casting an openly gay Asian actor. Well, it was just announced that the role will be played by... Richard Madden, who has here-to-fore avoided any discussions about his personal life. We’ll see how long that lasts.

When Ikaris isn’t being played by Scarlett Johansson, it’s definitely time to end yet another column. It’s also time to get out of Casablanca—I’m getting tired of being called Ilia! I’m also looking forward to returning to the United States. Of course, I’m not returning to reality—I’m going directly to Provincetown. Details of that trip will likely show up on www.BillyMasters.com—the site where nobody’s keeping score. If you have any specific questions, send them along to Billy@BillyMasters.com and I promise to get back to you before Richard Madden reveals he’s part Asian! Until next time, remember, one man’s filth is another man’s bible.
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This year marks two significant milestones for the LGBTQ+ community; the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising of 1969 which sparked the Gay Revolution and the 15th anniversary of marriage equality in the state of Massachusetts.

Honorees of the LGBTQ+ event will be selected from a variety of fields ranging from academia, the arts, technology, healthcare, financial services to retail, illustrating the diversity of the LGBTQ+ individuals who are contributing to the economic, social, and civic fabric of Greater Boston.

The event will be held on Thursday, September 26. More details will follow.

If you’d like to serve on the nominating committee please email Jeff Coakley at jcoakley@baywindows.com Or if you have an individual you’d like to nominate please go to http://bit.ly/GK25LGBTQ