

## *LGBTQ Youths' Speech and Writing as Contributors to a Rich and Diverse School Culture*

Joseph Dial, Ph.D., Director, Queer Foundation Effective Writing and Scholarships Program, [jdial@queerfoundation.org](mailto:jdial@queerfoundation.org)

The Queer Foundation grants to teachers and counselors permission to reproduce and use in their schools, for educational purposes only, the student-produced essays links to which appear at <http://queerfoundation.org>. Please give credit to the authors and to the Queer Foundation's Effective Writing and Scholarships Program.

We would like to hear from you. How have you used the essays and how did you hear about them? Send email to [jdial@queerfoundation.org](mailto:jdial@queerfoundation.org).

### **Excerpts<sup>1</sup> from High School Seniors' Essays**

1. I stood in between the dusty shelves of my school library, scanning the titles in front of me. Our library is seldom used, and I was starting to get frustrated with the unorganized shelving system. The possibility that I would find my book for history seemed out of reach when a lavender spine caught my eye. The title read: *A Woman Like That: Lesbian and Bisexual Writers Tell Their Coming-Out Stories*. Without thinking, I grabbed the book and slipped it into my bag.

After reading the first two sentences of the introduction, my heart was racing and my palms were sweating. I had to put the book down for a second- it was just too real. I knew that I wasn't entirely "normal": the way my eyes lingered over girls in the locker room and the disinterest I had in kissing my ex-boyfriend gave me away, at least to myself. I had ignored these inklings, but I could do so no longer: I was desperately in love with my best friend.

Simi and I had known each other for a while, but we got to know each other better when she transferred into my lunch period. I'd loved how she was so blunt, so un-afraid to be herself. . . .

Sophia Deady, "A Woman Like Me: Pink Ink and My Coming Out Story"  
(<http://queerfoundation.org/docs/essays/A Woman Like Me.docx>)

2. My head was jammed up against a red metal locker. It felt cold against my face and my neck was turned in a funny way that necks aren't supposed to turn. An unforgiving hand just wouldn't let up. Words like "fag" and "queer" permeated the air, but my mind was humming so loudly I could barely hear them. I kept waiting for his foot to connect. I was in a foreign place. I was in boy world: the gym locker room. I had no friends there. I kept waiting for his foot to connect. I remember hoping that he'd kick me hard and beat me until there wasn't any life left in me.

I was still in the closet. The future was shapeless and black. Any conception of a happy future was non-existent in my mind. I kept waiting for his foot to connect. The shame of my situation clung to me, closer than my tightest pair of skinny jeans. It was sheer; through the shame you could see the skeleton of a person I had become, without pride and barely clinging to life. The shame welled up from a fear of revealing who I was to the world and disappointing it. Maybe if this boy kicked hard enough I could escape the shame, float above my body and finally live in vibrant color. I kept waiting for his foot to connect. I kept waiting for the fatal blow.

His foot never did come. Another boy, an older boy, picked up my attacker and told him to fuck off. Just like that, it was over. I walked out of the locker room and soldiered on. I like to think of this moment as a worm hole in my life. I had to go through it, right through the center, passing through the shame, the hurt, and the unknowing in order to arrive at the current universe in which I reside. A complete alternate reality. This moment gave me the courage to come out. I realized I wasn't safe in the closet, I was flaming; the bullies were going to kick me around regardless of whether or not I was being my authentic self. The only thing I was hiding from back there behind last season's Jimmy Choos was my own happiness. . . .

Alan Quinn, "What I Know Now"  
(<http://queerfoundation.org/docs/essays/What I Know Now.docx>)

---

<sup>1</sup> from The QF's annual English essay contest for high school seniors (<http://queerfoundation.org/html/flyer.html>)

3. In my sophomore year, I cut my hair for the first time. I was on the swim team and in the Rodriguez marching band. To stuff all of my long golden curls into a swim cap or squish them under a marching band hat was a big hassle. After several weeks of deliberating with my friends, I went into Great Clips and asked my hairdresser, Queen, to cut my hair, all of it. I heard the scissors slice through my thick blonde locks and saw them fall to the floor. There wasn't a moment of fear or panic or a feeling of being unattractive. I felt free.

I ran my fingers through my new boy cut hair and had the biggest grin on my face. I looked more masculine and I loved it. For the first time, I felt like myself. I had never considered cutting my hair and the change was incredible and eye opening. From there, everything started to transform. . . .

Skailer Qvistgaard, "Now I Am Skailer"  
(<http://queerfoundation.org/docs/essays/Now I Am Skailer.docx>)

4. "We write not only about different things; we also write differently."

Brecht

"Just deal with what is true...you need to do your best to say it correct."

Father Roger Schmit, to the members of the Tectonic Theatre Project in  
*The Laramie Project*

Over dainty appetizers the year I turned sixteen, a former wrestler introduced me to my own history. He was well-spoken and polite, with a knack for spirited debate. He was also one of America's best-selling and most admired novelists, and fourteen star-struck high school writers (myself included) stared at their feet in awe while he spoke. John Irving had been invited to Walnut Hill School for the Arts to give a public reading and field questions about his creative process. In between events, he chatted with students from the creative writing department about the intersections between his art and politics. Gay marriage, he said during one of these conversations, should already be guaranteed in the United States, and "gay writing" understood as an established part of the American literary canon. At its best, queer literature creates community and helps shape the social identity of a marginalized group while representing that group's experiences to the world at large. The problem, Irving argued, lies in the execution. Today, the would-be queer Don Quixote often falls into the trap of issuing cautionary tales or describing sex positions, confirming the larger community's preconceived notions about gay life. Too few well-written narratives center on constructing, representing, and re-inventing queer identity.

"Whatever happened to the Great Gay Novel?" Irving bemoaned to a roomful of teenagers. "Where in the hell is the next Giovanni's Room?"

I was surprised to discover I had no idea. Not much more than a year before, I had slammed a Webster's School Dictionary on the desk of the wise guy in my ninth grade health class. "Look up the word gay!" I growled, one hiking boot propped on a chair by way of challenge. I carried myself with a resentful swagger, lecturing and picking fights at every opportunity. My wrath was clublike, blunt-edged, awful. At the same time, though, I was terrified. I used bizarre metaphors for sexual orientation in my poems and flinched when an acquaintance showed the slightest affection for his boyfriend. My anger at being misrepresented was directionless, my attempts to educate classmates about life as a young lesbian tinged by a comical lack of knowledge (and creeping fear) surrounding what that actually meant. I may have cut my teeth on Oscar Wilde and cried the first time I read a gay community newspaper, but meeting John Irving—a straight male writer—forged my first real connection to queer writing as a distinct art.

The 1956 James Baldwin novel *Giovanni's Room* is a book of regret and frustration, but also (perhaps most controversially for the time period) of love. . . .

Sadie McCarney, "Pansies in Print: Queer Literature, Social Identity,  
and the Definition of Community"  
(<http://queerfoundation.org/docs/essays/QF2010McCarney.doc>)