Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence Short Guide

Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence by Marion Dane Bauer

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Contents

Overview

Am I Blue?, published in 1994, contains sixteen stories by well-known young adult authors, some of them gay and some of them not. The collection includes one story each by Bruce Coville, M.E. Kerr, Francesca Lia Block, Jacqueline Woodson, Gregory Maguire, Ellen Howard, James Cross Giblin, Nancy Garden, C. S. Adler, Leslea Newman, Lois Lowry, Jane Yolen, Jonathan London, Cristina Salat, William Sleator, and Marion Dane Bauer herself. The themes of the stories range from questioning one's sexuality, to coming out to family and friends, to discovering that one's parents are gay. In tone, the stories range from the comic title story by Bruce Coville, "Am I Blue?" to the sad and sensitive "Holding" by Lois Lowry and the lyrical and surprising "Winnie and Tommy" by Francesca Lia Block. Many of the included authors have won literary prizes for their work, and all of them are popular writers among young adult readers. Each writer provides a brief commentary on his or her story, helping to provide context for the tale.

About the Author

Award-winning author and editor Marion Dane Bauer was born in the small prairie town of Oglesby, Illinois in 1938.

She has described her childhood as "idyllic," and began writing at a young age. Her young adult fiction often has a strong sense of place, since she writes about locales she knows well and provides rich details of them. While none of her fiction is strictly autobiographical, much of it is based on her personal experiences. When she was young, neighbor boys had gone swimming and one drowned, leaving the other to either explain what had happened or remain silent about his friend's disappearance. This event was the kernel of the award-winning On My Honor (1986). Bauer has also had experience as a foster parent, experience that formed the background for Foster Child (1977). Shelter from the Wind (1976), later adapted for television, makes use of Bauer's intimate knowledge of the prairie in its Oklahoma setting.

Bauer married an Episcopal priest in 1959 and together they had two children.

She taught briefly as a high school English teacher, and has many years' experience teaching creative writing in a variety of settings. Bauer was divorced in 1987 and currently lives with her partner Ann Goddard.

Bauer's mid-life coming out as a lesbian was part of the impetus for her collection of stories Am I Blue?, which was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and won the 1995 Lambda Literary Award for best gay young adult book. Bauer has said that all of us learn "that we are alone," but that fiction "can cut through our isolation . . .

because fiction can move us inside another human being, allow us to share the thoughts and feelings and to see the world through those other eyes." This belief in the power of stories is central to the tales she has collected in Am I Blue?, the first anthology of stories about gay and lesbian youth to be published by a major publisher. As Bauer notes in her introduction, "One out of ten teenagers attempts suicide. One out of three of these do so because of concern about being homosexual. That means that in every statistical classroom across the country there is one young person in danger of dying for lack of information and support concerning his or her sexuality." The stories Bauer has collected provide some of that information and support for both gay teens, teens who are questioning their sexuality, and heterosexual teens with gay friends or relatives.

Setting

The settings of the stories range from the rural to the urban, although the majority have a small town or suburban setting that will not only be familiar to many readers, but also suggests that homosexuality is not urban or exotic, but a part of everyday life in every part of the United States. Jacqueline Woodson's story "Slipping Away" takes place at a summer beach colony, where questions of sexuality threaten to separate two best "summer friends." Francesca Lia Block's touching tale of a boyfriend and girlfriend whose relationship makes an important shift takes place in San Francisco.

Bruce Coville's story "Am I Blue?" takes place in a college town. There is as much variety in the settings as there is in the teens who inhabit them and in their questions about sexuality.

Social Sensitivity

Bauer's collection of short stories does an admirable job of illustrating the complexity and richness of gay life, the difficulties of being gay in a homophobic society, and the ways in which people of all colors and situations may be gay. There are Jewish, African-American, Chinese, Hispanic, Vietnamese, and Euro-American characters in these stories. There are urban characters, rural characters, and suburban characters, and even some foreign and fantasy characters. There are intact families and divorced families, families with grandparents living with them and families isolated from other relatives. Eight of the stories are specifically about girls and their sexuality, and the other eight focus on boys.

One of the strengths of all of these stories is that people are not demonized, only ideas are demonized. There are parents who do not understand their gay teenagers, parents who sometimes say cruel things, but there are no cruel parents: all of them try to understand, with varying degrees of success. The villain in these stories is not a person, but rather hate and fear: hatred and fear of the unknown and the misunderstood. The goal of the collection is to shed some light on teens and sexuality, and on the whole the collection succeeds admirably.

None of the gay characters is a stereotype. Some of the lesbian girls are athletic and some are not; some wear dresses and makeup and others do not. Some of the homosexual boys are interested in the arts, Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence others are not. Each story respects the characters' decision to be homosexual, bisexual, or still unsure, a respect society does not often afford young people. Likewise, none of the ethnic characters is a stereotype. In fact, nearly all of the ethnic characters in the stories are bi-racial, a mix of black and white, or black and Asian, or Hispanic and white. Since these are sixteen stories by sixteen individual authors, this cannot have been planned, but it does help underline the fact that homosexuality is just one more difference among human beings, and that racial prejudice shares quite a lot with prejudice against homosexuals. In this sense the collection argues not only for sexual tolerance, but for racial tolerance and equity as well.

The stories in the collection deal both honestly and sensitively with the issue of sexual desire. The most daring story in the collection is probably James Cross Giblin's "Three Mondays in July," set in 1951. David finds himself fascinated not only by his best friend Paul, but by a good-looking older man he sees wearing tight swim trunks at the beach. Here it is the adolescent who has strong sexual feelings for the adult, who as it turns out is gay. But he is no pedophile: he recognizes David's confusion, walks and talks with him in public places, and tells him at the end of the story that "you are not alone," a message that gives David hope that he might grow up in a world where he is not so different and solitary as he thought.

The psychological honesty here of the boy's desire for the older man, and the older man's desire to help David but not exploit him sexually, are dealt with honestly and sensitively.

Other stories contain more overt sexual passages: the girls in "Dancing Backwards" and "50% Chance of Lightning" kiss, as do the boys in "The Honorary Shepherds" and "Michael's Little Sister"; the girls in "Supper" kiss and fondle each others' breasts.

But there is no genital sex portrayed in these stories: the emphasis is on desire, attraction, and the first tentative steps towards sexual expression.

AIDS is not explicitly dealt with in the stories, although it makes oblique appearances. This lack of emphasis on a serious health issue would be more problematic in stories that dealt with genital sex than they are in these stories. Some adult readers might wish for some more information in these stories concerning AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, although this is generally not an adult concern in novels about sexually active heterosexual teenagers. Another shortcoming of the stories is that none of them deals with poor or working class teenagers: all of the characters are comfortably middle-class. Issues of sexuality play differently in both poor communities and in ethnic communities than they do in mainstream society, but these stories do not acknowledge these differences.

But the hope of the collection is to shed some light on sexuality and its complications for teen readers, both male and female, both white and not, and on this score the volume succeeds admirably.

Literary Qualities

The literary quality of the stories in Am I Blue? varies from good to superb. Overall, the majority of the stories (like much of young adult fiction) is first-person narration by the teen protagonist: this is true of ten of the sixteen stories. Two of the stories, Francesca Lia Block's "Winnie and Tommy" and Gregory Maguire's "The Honorary Shepherds" are somewhat experimental or postmodern in their narrative approaches.

Fourteen of the stories are realistic tales, almost all of them set in the present. One story, Jane Yolen's "Blood Sisters," is a fantasy tale, and William Sleator's "In the Tunnels" reads almost like a fantasy tale: it is set in the Vietcong tunnels during the Vietnam war, and told from a Vietnamese point of view. With such a wide variety of tales, there is bound to be a wide variety in literary quality as well.

Many of the stories employ important word play, often in their titles. Double meanings of words and phrases are especially important in gay culture, where it is sometimes safer to speak in a kind of code that only other gay people can understand. The title of the entire collection, Am I Blue?, employs such word play. The "blue" literally refers to the blueness Melvin bestows upon those with homosexual leanings, but it also refers to "blue" as in sad or depressed, as well as to blues singing. Importantly, "Am I blue" is a question, not a conclusion. Something the entire collection of stories suggests is that honesty about oneself and a willingness to fight for one's rights will save one from depression and "blueness." Similar word play can be seen in the title of Ellen Howard's "Running," which is literally about the friendship two girls strike up while running on a school track, but is metaphorically about the choice to either run from one's sexuality or confront and deal with it, no matter how difficult the consequences may be. Likewise, the title of Lois Lowry's "Holding" suggests holding onto memory, holding onto love, holding onto the truth, holding onto each other, holding fast to family and friends, no matter what—and it also suggests the kind of "holding pattern" the narrator has been in concerning acknowledging his father's homosexuality. Word play can also be found within stories. Jacqueline Woodson's characters spend the summers at "Orient Point," a favorite summering spot for lesbians. "Orient Point" suggests both sexual orientation and the kind of marginalization that those who are different face in this society.

Some of the stories are stylistically simple, although they might be thematically complex. Nancy Garden's "Parents' Night," for example, has a pedestrian teen voice telling the story, and there is little specifically literary in this tale of coming out to one's parents and friends. The exception is the symbolism of the rose that the father first does not give his daughter on her birthday, and then as he reconciles himself to her lesbianism, he does give to her. The rose suggests love and family connection (the first rose was given to her mother the day the narrator was born), as well as romantic love that defies expectations (the rose is yellow, not the usual red). It also suggests the full bloom of womanhood and the constant renewal of life. Leslea Newman's story "Supper" is another first-person narration by an ordinary-sounding teen. Meryl Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence is a vegetarian in a family of meat-eaters and is different in another way: she prefers girls to boys, and has practiced kissing with her best friend

Patty, which she has found exciting in ways kissing boys is not. Her grandmother, who lives with the family, keeps trying to get Meryl to eat more, and especially to eat meat, telling her granddaughter that "the boys ain't gonna like you if you get too skinny." As her grandmother talks and Meryl runs water for the dinner dishes, she thinks about kissing Patty until her face is as hot as the dishwater. The story ends as the grandmother leaves the kitchen and Meryl slowly picks up leftover pieces of meat and begins to eat them. Here the metaphor of eating—of communion— is applied not only to the family, but also to Meryl's sexuality. She is unsure of herself, knowing only that Patty excites her in ways boys do not, and her uncertainty and her desire to fit in is symbolized by her final acceptance of meat and the giving-up of her vegetarianism, of her difference. The story ends on an unfinished note, leaving the reader to wonder if Meryl will continue to try to fit in, or if she will find the courage to be different.

Not surprisingly, it is the stories that are not in a first-person teen voice that are the most stylistically interesting. Most teen voices, in order to be realistic, cannot be overly stylistic, which is not the case with omniscient narrators. The narrator in Francesca Lia Block's "Winnie and Tommy" has a sophisticated and lyrical voice that captures young adult feelings about the world, but in a language more advanced than most teens can express (although they certainly can understand it). San Francisco is described as a city "that seemed made of honey and charcoal"; in a Japanese restaurant the "tea smelled sweet, like brown rice"; a street musician "had cafe au lait skin, long dark curls, a beautiful face, and an androgynous body that swayed in a puffed-sleeve midriff shirt, tight shorts, and high pirate boots." Block's prose is filled with vivid and sensual details of the sorts of things young adults notice, but sometimes do not have the words to express. The stylistic innovation in this story, as in Block's successful series of books about Weetzie Bat and her family, has to do with a vivid, invented, detailed description of people and places that seems somehow of our time and of anytime: a timeless kind of teenage world.

Block partly accomplishes this by staying away from contemporary slang, which has generally become outmoded by the time it hits print, in favor of an invented slang that is at once comprehensible and totally innovative. For example, Tommy wears "the best chunky-puppy shoes instead of the narrow-weasel shoes that some guys wore."

Gregory Maguire's stylistic innovation in "The Honorary Shepherds" has less to do with style and more to do with narrative approach. The story begins with an unnamed narrator telling the reader, "To satisfy that particular curiosity first: Yes, this is a story about two boys who sleep together."

The narrator is knowing, hip, and conscious of having to tell a story to an audience likely to be impatient for the "good parts"—hence the beginning sentence. The narrator continues to talk knowingly to his audience: "Notice how often the trailers they show at the Cineplex 1-12 are more interesting than the ninety-eight-minute feature film you've paid good money to see? In the future there will be no movies, only coming attractions."

"This story has a plot, and here it goes." "If this story ever gets bought for an After School TV special, please note: The soundtrack of this montage should be more

staccato than legato." The narrator, and therefore the reader, is always conscious that a story is being told, being shaped, that things are left out. The language the narrator uses, and many of his images, are taken from film and video, which is fitting for a story about two boys falling in love while shooting a video. Maguire's style is also as energetic and fast-moving as an MTV video. As an adult writer, he does not attempt to imitate a contemporary teen voice, but instead adopts a slightly older, slightly cynical tone that will be appealing to teens.

The sole fantasy story in the collection, Jane Yolen's "Blood Sister," is told in pieces, from a variety of points of view. As Yolen says in her comment upon the story, she was interested in the "ways we tell history [sic]: through narrative, parable, balladry, folktale, and academic explanations." She provides examples of each in her story of Selna, a young girl on the verge of maturity who mourns the loss of her female soulmate and first love, Marda. The girls live in an invented land called The Dales, a land inhabited by communities of women. The story provides no clear explanation of how the world works, but does provide origin myths of the land, stories of Selna's life, ballads that the women sing, later historians' explanations of what objects and archeological ruins might tell us of the women of the Dales. The one constant in the story is Selna's love for her lost Marda, and the connection she must make instead to her Dark Sister, Marjo. The story is mysterious, intriguing, and beautiful, a story of passions of the heart more than passions of the body.

A number of the stories in the collection are humorous as well. Bruce Coville's title story, "Am I Blue?," is filled with unexpected comic moments as characters' expectations of others are overturned: the homophobic Butch turns out to be gay, for example. Cristina Salat's "50% Chance of Lightning" is a humorous but touching story of a girl who knows she is a lesbian even though she has not had a girlfriend.

When she finally finds herself kissing a girl, thoughts of an abandoned dog skitter into her head and she cannot concentrate on the moment—not because she is conflicted about her sexuality, but because this particular girl does not appeal to her the way another girl does. Robin's humorous attempts to figure out whether to go to college, what to do with her life, and which girl to choose are given to us in third-person narration, allowing the reader some perspective on Robin's life and adding to the humor of the story.

Themes and Characters

All of the stories in Bauer's collection concern teens who question sexuality, their own or someone else's, but each story has a particular view of this complex theme. Reading these stories is like flipping through a scrapbook or photograph album: each story is a small, individual snapshot of a much larger story of teens coming to grips with the difficult subject of sexuality.

Bruce Coville's title story, "Am I Blue?," sets the broad parameters of the fifteen stories that follow. Vincent, the teen narrator of the story, begins by telling how Butch Corrigan has beaten him up for being "a little fruit." Vincent is a "confused puppy" about his sexuality, as the other major character in the story, Melvin, tells him. Melvin is Vince's "fairy godfather," the first one ever, and he has the power to grant Vince three wishes.

Melvin is a guardian angel, killed in a gay bashing, and determined to use his angelic or magical presence both to help confused individuals like Vince and to make the world a safer place for gay people. He is a wonderful creation, fashionable and "swishy" in a way that at first might appear to be stereotypical, but with an inner strength and determination that underline for the reader just how deceiving appearances can be, which is one of the major themes of the story. When Vince complains about the "swishy" way Melvin walks, Melvin says, "Honey, I gave my life to be able to walk like this. Don't you dare try to stop me now. . . . I walk and talk the way I do because I'm not going to let anyone define me.

I can turn it off whenever I want, you know."

Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence Vincent gradually comes to trust and even respect Melvin, and he uses his three wishes wisely. His first is for "gaydar," a term gays use for a kind of sixth sense that helps us identify other gays around us.

Melvin provides Vince with the ability to see people in shades of blue, the deepness of the hue corresponding with the extent of the person's homosexuality. Vincent himself is slightly tinged with blue, but when he looks around him he is astonished at the people who range in color from deep blueberry to pale blue. When he watches the evening news, he discovers a homophobic and conservative politician is deeply blue as are three members of the favored Super Bowl team. Vincent's second wish is for everyone, coast to coast, to have gaydar for a day and to be able to see everyone's shade of blue. Melvin obliges, and for twenty-four hours pandemonium reigns as people turn varying shades of blue and everyone figures out the significance of the color change.

Vincent's last wish is for his tormentor Butch to be turned blue, but he ends up getting to save his last wish, because Butch has turned "blue as a summer sky" on his own. So Vincent saves his last wish for "when I really need it—maybe when I meet the girl of my dreams. Or Prince Charming.

Whichever."

Coville's story gives the reader a comic overview of the themes that many of the following stories work out in detail: the continuum of sexuality, in that there are varying shades and intensities of homosexual desire in human beings; of justified fear of persecution and violence at the hands of those who fear and hate gays; of the difficulty of finding someone trustworthy to talk to about sexuality; of the confusion many teens feel about their emotions and about their sexuality.

A number of the stories confront the issue of how difficult it is for teens to talk to others about sexuality, often for fear of reprisal or rejection. Jacqueline Woodson's "Slipping Away" is the story of teenage Maria and Jacina, who are summer friends at the Orient Point beach community. Maria is Puerto Rican and Jacina is bi-racially African-American and white. The summer of the story, Maria is changing. Although Jacina's mother says that she and her husband chose Orient Point because it is a tolerant community and "Anyone can live here and not feel like a pariah," Maria complains about the number of "lesbos" and "dites" ("dykes") in the town. Maria wonders aloud if Jacina's mother "wants you to be [a lesbian]? She's always taking up for them." Jacina says her mother "takes up for them because she says they have a right.... She takes up for them because she married my father." But Maria does not see the connection between homophobia and racial discrimination, and Jacina feels "Maria slipping backward, away from me," and finds herself unable to talk to this old friend.

She asks Maria if Maria would still love her if she, Jacina, were a lesbian, and Maria says, "I don't know," and walks off alone down the beach, leaving Jacina waiting at the end of the story.

Jacina is waiting to see if her friendship with Maria can continue, if she herself might be gay, if discrimination against homosexuals can end the bond she has had with Maria. The story is not about Jacina's sexual confusion so much as it is about her attempts to make sense of a world that for her is literally not black and white, a world filled with discrimination against those who are different both racially and sexually, a world where discrimination makes friendship difficult.

Another story dealing with difficulties teens have dealing with a homophobic society is Lois Lowry's "Holding." In this story, Willie is the son of divorced parents and lives with his mother. When the story opens, his father's spouse has died and Willie has agreed to go to the memorial service. But the spouse who has died, named Chris, is a man with whom Willie's father has lived for nine years. Willie has never been honest with his best friend about his father's sexuality, letting the friend assume that "Chris" is female, and being careful to keep pronouns sexually neutral when discussing his father's partner. When he returns, he finally tells his best friend Jon that Chris was a man. Jon is startled, but his major reaction is annoyance that Willie has been holding out on him. Once he opens up to Jon, Willie can finally cry about Chris' death, and Jon holds him and consoles him until Willie pulls himself together, pulls away, and says "Penalty for holding," and Jon counters with "For holding out." The boys end by joking about male bonding, but they clearly have bonded, and over grief for the death of a gay man. The boys' sexuality is not at issue in the story, but their perceptions of and reactions to homosexuality are. Willie is unable to grieve until he is honest about who Chris was and

how important Chris was in his life, and the story suggests one of the heavy prices that silence about sexuality can impose on us.

Francesca Lia Block's story "Winnie and Tommy" is about an idyllic boyfriend/ girlfriend relationship that takes an important turn. Both Winnie and Tommy come from unhappy families, and have helped each other survive high school. After graduation, they drive to San Francisco to celebrate. They stay in a hotel room together, but Tommy keeps pulling away from Winnie, until he finally tells her, "I like guys. I've always liked guys." Winnie, shocked and angry, screams, "How can you tell me this?

I'm your girlfriend," and Tommy replies, "If I can't tell you, who am I supposed to tell?" Tommy goes out by himself for the evening and Winnie finds herself thinking that she does not have to lose Tommy, he can still be her best friend, there are other boys to be boyfriends with. When Tommy returns, very late, he tells her he went to a bar and "danced with some guys," and tells Winnie "I'll never leave you. It will just be a different thing," and the two fall asleep "wrapped in each other's arms like little children." Here the theme of the story is only peripherally that of Tommy's difficulties and confusion in reconciling himself to his homosexuality: the focus is on the importance of friendship and especially of the importance of honesty in friendship.

Other stories focus on the importance of honesty within families and the difficulties of coming out to parents and to siblings.

M. E. Kerr's "We Might As Well All Be Strangers" is about a young Jewish girl who tells her grandmother she is gay, and the grandmother counters with a story of how she herself was discriminated against by a German family in the years just before the Second World War, and ends by saying, "You don't have to tell me about prejudice.

But Alison, I thank you for telling me about yourself. I'm proud that you told me first."

Alison's mother, when Alison tells her of her lesbianism, wants Alison to keep it quiet and not "announce" it, especially to her grandmother. The mother says to do so would be "to kill an old woman before her time," and says if she's wrong about the grandmother, "then I don't know her and you don't know me, and we might as well all be strangers." The story ends as Alison writes in her diary, "My grandmother knew .. . my mother knew.. . one day my mother would know that my grandmother knew.

All coming-out stories are a continuing process. Strangers take a long time to become acquainted, particularly when they are from the same family." The mother is less accepting than the grandmother, and secrets about sexuality are ultimately secrets about identity, the story suggests: if we cannott be honest about who we are sexually, we cannot have honest and healthy family relationships.

Another coming out story that plays with this theme is Nancy Garden's "Parents' Night." Karen's father has recently learned she is gay, and for the first time ever neglects to give her a rose on her birthday.

Karen and her girlfriend Roxy are members of a high school Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance. When Karen announces her membership in this organization, and the fact that she will be at its booth on Parents' Night at the high school, her father blows up and her mother—a social worker who should know better—also reacts badly. On Parents' Night the booth is treated respectfully (despite some overnight vandalism by fellow students), and Karen is surprised to find her parents have come. "Mom was smiling bravely, and hanging onto Dad's arm as if she were trying to show the world he belonged to her and they were a happy, welladjusted couple." Her father walks over to the booth, kisses her, and delivers the birthday rose he had failed to deliver on her birthday. The story ends with the hope that the family is on its way to reconciliation and understanding.

Other stories in the collection deal more forthrightly with sexual feelings and even sexual activity among teens. Gregory Maguire's "The Honorary Shepherds" is a story of "two boys who sleep together.

Eventually. Not genitally, or anyway not at the time of this writing." Lee is a mix of Puerto Rican, Polish, and Irish, and Pete is half-Chinese and half African-American.

They meet and fall in love in a high school video-making class in which the final project is to rewrite and film a myth. Lee and Pete rewrite the story of the birth of Jesus, starring a multiracial and multiethnic group of shepherds, including themselves as the starring shepherds, two young men in love and worshiping at the manger. Their wise teacher's comment upon their final project is, "my only remark is that of course the Holy Birth was always meant to be one that would bring people together, not tear them apart. Very fine work, boys. Live out the old myth, pour new life into it. You belong there."

While the story does not present the reader with a sex scene, the narrator does provide "time out for some distracting nuzzling" between the boys and they "sit in each other's laps and stroke each other's hair and kiss each other, gently." Sex in writing for teens is always controversial, even more so when it involves homosexual sex, but in "The Honorary Shepherds" and several other stories, sex and sexual desire are presented honestly and without embarrassment. All teenagers experience sexual desire, and it is always confusing—even more so for teens whose desires are for those of the same sex. It is important in a collection like this that the sexual nature of homosexuality, even in teenagers, be acknowledged. It is acknowledged in Bauer's own story in the collection, "Dancing Backwards," which takes place in a convent boarding school in 1956. Two girls, roommates and best friends, have pushed their beds together in the dormitory, although they are not indulging in any sort of sexual play. When the nuns discover this, the girls are accused of lesbian behavior and banished from the school. The narrator's response is that she had never realized that lesbianism even existed, but now "For the first time in my life I saw that the love, the actual, corporeal love, of another woman was something to be desired, that it might even be more to be desired than the approval of nuns and teachers and parents."

As the girls pack for their dismissal, they look at each other: Neither of us spoke, but after a timeless moment when the terror and the ecstasy vibrated between us like the

strings of [an] angel's harp, we stepped into one another's arms and kissed, long and sweetly. . . .

When we finally broke our embrace, it was Cindy, my precious Cindy, who with awkward, trembling hands, began to unbutton my blouse. And then the discoveries—the warm silk of skin, the mound of breast and pubic, the deep, deep communion—began.

The story is a beautiful one, one that lets the reader know that even nearly fifty years ago teenagers experienced sexual desire, and also that true love is a "communion" not only in the physical, but in the spiritual sense of the word.

Topics for Discussion

1. In "Slipping Away," find specific examples of the similarities between racial prejudice and sexual prejudice.

2. What choices about life do you think Vince makes as an adult, based on what we learn about him in "Am I Blue?"

3. What are the parents afraid of in "Parents' Night" and in "We Might As Well All Be Strangers?" If these parents met together, what do you suppose their conversation might be like?

4. What does Willie in "Holding" have in common with the mother in "We Might As Well All Be Strangers?" Who do you think is more mature by the end of the stories, and why?

5. What is the significance of the title of "Hands"?

6. Of the eight stories about lesbian characters, what do these characters share in common? What are their differences?

7. Of the eight stories about homosexual boys, what do these characters share in common? What are their differences?

8. Both "Four Mondays in July" and "Dancing Backwards" take place in the 1950s.

How much do you think attitudes towards homosexuality have changed since then, based upon these stories and your own experiences?

9. How realistic do you think the portraits of the teachers in "The Honorary Shepherds" and "Parents' Night" are? Do teachers usually get involved in students' private lives? Do teachers frequently stand up for students who are different? Should they?

10. What do you think the reaction would really be if people began to turn blue the way they do in Bruce Coville's story?

Would society become more or less tolerant of homosexuality? Would having a visible sign of your sexuality make it easier or more difficult for you to deal with your own sexuality?

11. Several of the adult characters ask the teen characters how they know they are gay. Why do you think adults never ask teens how they know they are heterosexual?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find out if your state or your community has laws that protect the civil rights of homosexuals.

2. Research hate crimes against homosexuals. Do you think Bruce Coville's story is accurate on this topic, or not, based upon your research?

3. If your school teaches sex education, does it include information on homosexuality and bisexuality? If so, is the information positive, negative, or neutral? How can you tell? If your school sex education does not include information on homosexuality, why do you think this is?

4. Write a story in which heterosexuality is as frowned upon as homosexuality is today. How would a boy and a girl in love behave in a world that frowned upon heterosexual love? Would they be able to hold hands or kiss in public?

What sorts of TV shows would be on the air? What would popular music sound like?

5. Choose one of the stories where adults are unhappy about their teen's sexual choices, and write the story from the adults' perspective.

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Many of the writers included in Am I Blue? have published other young adult fiction dealing with homosexuality. Nancy Garden's Annie on My Mind is the story of two high school girls who fall in love; Francesca Lia Block's series of short novels about Weetzie Bat (beginning with Weetzie Bat and collected as Baby Be-Bop) chronicle the lives of a group of young people with diverse sexualities; Jacqueline Woodson's The Dear One tells the story of a young AfricanAmerican girl nurtured by a lesbian couple; M. E. Kerr's Deliver Us From Evie explores a lesbian relationship between two girls of different social classes.

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