

WHERE ARE HEATHER'S TWO MOMMIES?

The number of kids living with gay parents has increased dramatically, but the amount of media catering to them has not

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EXCLUSIVELY FOR *THE ADVOCATE*

WHEN LESLÉA NEWMAN wrote the landmark *Heather Has Two Mommies* more than 18 years ago, not a single publisher would touch it. Not a gay press, not an independent children's book publisher, and certainly not a major publishing house like Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, or G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Eventually, she published it via a friend's small press, raising money for the first run through \$10 donations from readers. Then gay publisher Alyson Books picked it up.

Newman's upcoming children's books—the first board books for infants featuring two moms and two dads—will be released by the independent children's publisher Tricycle Press in 2009. Tricycle publisher Nicole Geiger sought Newman out for the job.

"I think of these books as Heather's little brothers and sisters," says Newman. "But again, these are still the first of their kind. About once a year one will squeak through from the major publishers. But in general, for picture books aimed at kids up to age 8, I haven't seen much change in the market over the past 18 years."

Children's media—DVDs, books, television programming, even songs—lag woefully behind the baby boom now under way in the gay community. Since the publication of *Heather*, gay parents have raised more than 400,000 children, according to statistics compiled by the Charles R. Williams Project on Sexual Orientation Law at the University of California, Los Angeles. Despite this, only about two dozen picture books aimed at those children have been published in the same time. And product is similarly scarce among

other children's media. Gay parents have no voice in mainstream children's programming; what does exist has been created and is often distributed independently by gay parents desperate to give their children media that reflect their lives.

Doing the Math

ALTERNATIVE FAMILY MEDIA faces an uphill battle in demonstrating the worth of the children of gay parents as an attractive market to mainstream producers. For one thing, books aimed at children of same-sex parents tend to be narrowly focused and uninteresting to wider audiences—and sometimes even to gay parents themselves. For another, gay parents haven't proven they'll buy enough of the books that do exist to make themselves a viable market.

Timothy Travaglini, a senior editor at G.P. Putnam's Sons, edited *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, which tells the story of a young girl guinea pig who's nervous about losing her relationship with her uncle as he prepares to marry his male partner. Travaglini says he knew of about seven children's books with gay parents when they bought the story.

"Barring an imprint like Alyson, there's not a lot of experience in the mainstream publishing world with this market," Travaglini says. "We can imagine that there's a market out there where parents will buy it and love it, but until it actually sells, we don't know what market we're dealing with."

For a small publisher, a press run of 5,000 books can take 10 →

years to sell. But for major publishers, runs are generally much larger, and if they don't sell through quickly, "they get a little panicky," says Bobbie Combs, who has been in the children's book publishing industry for 25 years. Even her company, Two Lives Publishing—which in addition to producing its own titles is dedicated to distributing a comprehensive catalog of all in-print books aimed at the children of same-sex parents—goes a little more into debt every year.

While the Internet has led to a boom in sales for all kinds of media aimed at children of gay parents, you're unlikely to see it merchandised in large stores like Barnes & Noble, Borders, and Costco. When chain stores do carry books like *Heather Has Two Mommies*, they're often filed in "special interest" sections—not with mainstream children's books. That's why it's hard to make the numbers work for such books, says Combs.

"Mainstream publishers don't see [alternative family] children's books as a niche that makes money," she continues. "That's the reason it's not happening, more so than bias. I know a lot of gay parents and gay people in publishing."

Attitudes are slowly changing. Recent higher-profile books include G.P. Putnam's Sons' *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, Simon and Schuster's *And Tango Makes Three*, and Aladdin's *The Sissy Duckling*, the latter written by Harvey Fierstein. And Tricycle Press has seen success with *King & King*, Newman's *The Boy Who Cried Fabulous*, and the gay-inclusive *Who's in a Family?* Newman's upcoming board books for Tricycle—*Daddy, Papa, and Me* and *Mommy, Mama, and Me*—represent a further leap of faith for the publisher, which is hoping for a receptive market.

David Gale, who edited *And Tango Makes Three* for Simon & Schuster, has received other submissions of picture books featuring gay parents over the years. But he didn't buy any of them. It's not that he's opposed to books with gay characters—he edits many of the press's young adult books, which frequently feature gay characters—but as an editor at a large publisher, his job is to find books that will appeal to as wide an audience as possible, and, he notes, gay and lesbian parents are already being serviced to a large extent by mainstream products. "That's one of the reasons that a book like *And Tango Makes Three* is so important," says Gale, "because kids of same-sex parents can see their own family in the book and it's a strong book by any terms."

Screen Silence

IT'S BEEN EVEN HARDER for children of same-sex parents to find themselves reflected on TV. When the PBS show *Postcards From Buster* sent its title character to Vermont to visit kids of lesbian moms and learn to make cheese and maple syrup, U.S. Education secretary Margaret Spellings sent a letter to PBS warning that "many parents would not want their young children exposed to the lifestyles portrayed in this episode." PBS responded by pulling the episode from national distribution, though several larger markets eventually chose to air it independently.

Counterintuitively, the 2000 family documentary *Our House*—which featured the everyday lives of gay parents and children—was shown on public television only at night, aimed at an adult audience. "In Idaho, before it went on they displayed a warning: 'This program is not suitable for families,' or something," says the film's director-producer Meema Spadola, herself the daughter of a lesbian mom. "I thought that was pretty weird." In Arkansas, home to one of the families featured, it didn't run at all.

The same invisibility holds true in children's programming. PBS Kids Sprout, a two-year-old toddler-oriented cable channel developed by PBS, Sesame Workshop, and other networks, isn't addressing children of gay parents right now, according to Jenni Glenn, senior director of communications for the channel. Rep-

resentatives at the kid's network Nickelodeon did not return calls seeking comment.

As for gay networks, neither here! nor Logo have prioritized children's programming. Logo's target age demographic is 25–49, though the network does feature occasional documentaries about gay families aimed at parents and teens. Similarly, here!'s founder and CEO Paul Colichman says only about one fifth of his channel's programming is aimed at families, mostly in the form of adventure movies.

"We haven't gotten a lot of calls for this kind of programming," he says. "Our viewers tend to like sexier programming. But children's programming is fun to produce, and we hope the demand for them grows."

Left with few options, gay and lesbian parents are going out on their own to make the media they want their kids to see. Various independent children's programs are available for direct purchase, such as the puppet-filled *Dottie's Magic Pockets*, and the animated *Buddy G: My Two Moms and Me*, in which Buddy and his moms solve crimes. Online services, such as Rainbow Rumpus, offer bedtime stories, games, and other media aimed at children of gay parents. And, desperate for representation, some kids of gay parents have taken to uploading songs about their families on YouTube.

Documentary filmmaker Lesli Klainberg and writer, producer, and actor Dan Bucatinsky are producing a pilot television program aimed at children like theirs. Klainberg says she hopes their show will be picked up by one of the gay channels and that she didn't even consider sending it to a mainstream station.

"It seemed impossible" to get such a show on a mainstream network, Klainberg says. "Why would they have a show whose entire demographic is children of gay parents?"

Klainberg's doing it, she says, because even though she lives in New York City and her kids see plenty of other kids with gay parents, they don't see themselves reflected in shows they and their friends watch, such as *Hannah Montana*.

"My kids have never consciously said to me, 'Why don't we see shows with two mommies in them?'" Klainberg explains. "But I think that's a parent's job. Our kids aren't conscious of not learning Spanish or taking piano or soccer or art, or whatever the things are. But we also live in a world where we want them to feel like they're just a part of a normal family like everyone else."

What About the Children?

KAS MORGAN WAS 1 when *Heather Has Two Mommies* debuted. Her mothers read it to her when she was a child, and she still remembers it, though she admits it's not her kind of book.

"It was more a book I read for affirmation than for the story," says Morgan, who asked that we not use her real name because her mother isn't out at work. "It was more like, 'OK, there's someone like me. That's cool.'"

Morgan, now 19, recalls that her favorite books usually involved the wilderness or kids getting out of dangerous situations. Still, she knows how important targeted books can be. Recently, students in her younger brother's conservative family-life class asked the teacher if her brother was going to hell because he has two moms. Morgan's response? She's sending him *The Case of the Stolen Scarab*, a mystery book aimed at middle graders in which the main characters have two moms.

"I'm protective of them," she says of her brothers, 10 and 12. "They're having to tell people all the time that we are just like everyone else. I remember having to say that. What I want them to be comfortable with is, 'I have two moms and here's what's different: I work double time on Mother's Day and have Father's Day off.' Things like that. They need something letting them know there is a supportive narrative of different kinds of families in literature too." ❖