There are countless reasons for reading, but when you're young and uncertain of your identity, of who you may be, one of the most compelling is the quest to discover yourself reflected in the pages of a book. What a comfort that provides, seeing that you are not alone, that you are not—as you had feared—the only one of your kind. But what if you search whole libraries of such books in vain for your own face? That—for too many years—was the plight of gay, lesbian, and transgender young adults. For as far as literature was concerned, they were invisible. And even when gay and lesbian characters did begin appearing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were too often presented—stereotypically—as unhappy outsiders doomed to lives lived
as "the other" on the outer fringes of society. Transgender teens remained invisible even longer, for their faces didn't appear in fiction for young adults until 2004. And they remain among the most underrepresented—and least understood—people in all of literature.

Which suggests another compelling reason for reading: It's a wonderful opportunity to meet those who may—in whatever way—be different from us. By taking us into characters' minds, hearts, and lives, literature has an uncanny ability to help us understand that those we previously regarded as "the other" are—in terms of our common humanity—actually "us."

In this spirit it's fortunate that in the last decade or so an increasingly large body of such literature has finally begun accruing. It now offers not only honest but also artful portrayals of lesbian, gay, and transgender young adults. As a result, these lives are being made accessible to all readers.

This collection contains stories by twelve of our finest authors for young adults, writing about what it might mean to be gay, lesbian, or transgender. Whether you're transgender, gay, or straight, you will find your own meanings in the stories that follow, of course, but for me one area of commonality is... their uncommonality. For, we discover, gay, lesbian, and transgender lives are as wonderfully various, diverse, and gloriously complex as any other lives. And not only are the lives these authors depict varied, so also are the strategies and devices they have used to tell their stories. As they demonstrate, while we can still find the truth of human experience in works of realism, we can also find it in works of speculative fiction; we can find it in traditional stories but also in nontraditional narratives; we can find it in words but also in pictures. Consider the contents of the book you're about to read.

It begins with David Levithan's nontraditional story, which is addressed directly to the reader; it's a story that, with singular sweetness, examines the present and future lives of a half-dozen gay teenagers as they—and the reader—find a nearly perfect balance between the past and the future that promises to produce an attainable world of fulfillment and hearts ease.

If that sounds almost magical, the next story contains elements of real magic as award-winning cartoonist Eric Shanower creates a graphic story about a troubled relationship that is complicated by the intervention of a genie who might have strayed into the story from the pages of The Arabian Nights. It turns out
there's magic not only in brass bottles but also in love.

Novelist and poet Ron Koertge then delivers a quirky work of experimental fiction that is rooted in the dangers and difficulties of coming out—still an issue even for today's gay teens—and how one young man finds and frees himself in a totally unexpected and wonderfully imaginative way.

Next, Jacqueline Woodson, winner of the Margaret A. Edwards Award, takes us inside the mind and heart of Trev, a young girl who knows what the rest of the world can't—that she's really a boy—and then shows us how he struggles heroically—even *super*heroically—to come to terms with his true self.

Francesca Lia Block, another Margaret A. Edwards Award winner, writes a haunting and lyrical story that begins in a virtual world when two young people encounter each other online and then develop a heartfelt relationship that will result in surprise . . . and satisfaction.

Australian author and two-time winner of the Michael L. Printz Honor Award Margo Lanagan finds inspiration for her gorgeously written story of not one but two desperate encounters with love in the classic poem "The Highwayman." Prepare to be dazzled.

William Sleator, that master of the outré, turns not to literature but to Thailand for his realistic and moving story of a young Thai man's hazardous quest to find love, but in the wrong place, face, and arms.

Then the gifted young cartoonist Ariel Schrag, whose graphic novels *Awkward, Dysfunction, Potential,* and *Likewise* chronicled her four years at Berkeley High School, offers readers a hilarious, sometimes existential, occasionally delusional tourist's-eye view of a San Francisco dyke march. (Get your picture taken with a topless dancer!)

Jennifer Finney Boylan, author of the bestselling memoir *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders,* writes a story about a girl who vanishes and the summer when a young teen named Jimmy "gave up on being a boy and became a girl instead."

Julie Anne Peters is a boundary breaker. Her novel *Luna,* a National Book Award finalist, was the first YA novel to feature a transgender character. Now in her story "First Time" she writes tenderly and honestly about two teenage girls who make the difficult—and occasionally terrifying—decision to express their love for each other physically.

In "Dear Lang," Emma Donoghue offers a short
story in the form of a heartfelt letter from a forgotten mother to the teenage daughter whom she hasn't seen in fourteen years.

And Gregory Maguire writes a story that, moving backward and forward in time, introduces readers to a man who confronts his memories of a passionate but "accidental" romance that still resonates in his present-day life.

And there you have it: twelve stories—alike only in the wonderful variety of their subjects, styles, and structures—that dramatically demonstrate that lesbian, gay, and transgender lives are extraordinary, yes, but also ordinary. How beautiful!

*Michael Cart*
You can't know what it is like for us now—you will always be one step behind.

Be thankful for that.

You can't know what it was like for us then—you will always be one step ahead.

Be thankful for that, too.

Trust us: There is a nearly perfect balance between the past and the future. As we become the distant past, you become a future only a few of us would have imagined.

It's hard to think of such things when you are busy dreaming or loving or screwing. The context falls away. We are a spirit-burden you carry, like that of your grandparents, or friends who moved away. We try to make it as light a burden as possible. We cannot be escapist in the same way. When we see you, there is nothing but context. We apologize: We cannot see you without thinking of ourselves. We were once the ones who were dreaming and loving and screwing. We were the ones who were living, and then we were the ones who were dying. We sewed ourselves, a thread's width, into your history. The generation of like-loving souls that was cut down before you were born.

We were once like you, only our world wasn't like yours.

You have no idea how close to death you came. Ten years. Twenty years. A generation or two earlier, you might not be here with us.

We resent you. You astonish us.

It's 8:07 P.M. on Saturday, March 8, and right now Neil Hayden is thinking of us. He is fifteen, and he is walking over to his boyfriend Peter's house. They have been going out for a year, and Neil starts by thinking about how long this seems. From the beginning, everyone has been telling him how it won't last. But now, even if it doesn't last forever, it feels like it has lasted long enough to be something. Peter's parents treat Neil like a second son, and while his own parents are still alternately confused and distressed, they haven't barred any of the doors.

Neil has a DVD, two bottles of Diet Dr Pepper,
cookie dough, and a book of Mark Doty poems in his backpack. This—and Peter—is all it takes for him to feel profoundly lucky. But luck, we've learned, is actually part of an invisible equation. Two blocks away from Peter's house, Neil gets a glimpse of this, and is struck with a feeling of deep, unnamed gratitude. He realizes that part of his good fortune is his place in history, and he thinks fleetingly of us, the ones who came before. We are not names or faces to him; we are an abstraction, a force. His gratitude is a rare thing—it is much more likely for a boy to feel thankful for the Diet Dr Pepper than he is to feel thankful for being healthy and alive, for being able to walk to his boyfriend's house at age fifteen without any doubt that this is the right thing to do.

He has no idea how beautiful he is as he walks up that path and rings that doorbell. He has no idea how beautiful the ordinary becomes once it disappears.

If you are a teenager now, it's unlikely that you knew us well. We are your shadow uncles, your angel godfathers, your mother's best friend from college, the author of the book you found in the gay section of the library. We are characters in a Tony Kushner play; we are names on a quilt that rarely gets taken out anymore. We are the ghosts of the remaining older generation. You know some of our songs.

We do not want to haunt you too somberly. We don't want our legacy to be gravitas. You wouldn't want to live your life like that, and you won't want to be remembered like that, either. Your mistake would be to find our commonality in our dying. The living part mattered more.

We taught you how to dance.

It's true. Look at Erik Johnson on the dance floor. Seriously—look at him. Six feet tall, one hundred eighty pounds, all of which can be converted by the right clothes and the right song into a mass of heedless joy. (The right hair helps, too.) He treats his body like it's made of fireworks, each one timed to the beat. Is he dancing alone or dancing with everyone? Here's the secret: It doesn't matter. He traveled for two hours to get to the city, and when it's all over, it will take him over two hours to get home. But it's worth it. Freedom isn't just about voting and marrying and kissing on the street, although all of these things are important. Freedom is also about what you will allow yourself to do.
We watch Erik Johnson when he’s sitting in Spanish class, sketching imaginary maps in his notebook. We watch Erik Johnson when he’s sitting in the cafeteria, stealing glances at older boys. We watch Erik Johnson as he lays the clothes on his bed, creating an outline of the person he’s going to be tonight. We spent years doing these things. But this was what we looked forward to, the thing that Erik looks forward to. This freedom.

Music isn’t much different now from what it was when we hit the dance floor. This means something. We found something universal. We bottled that desire, then released it into airwaves. The sounds hit your body, and you move.

We are in those particles that send you. We are in that music.

Dance for us, Erik.

Feel us there in your freedom.

It was an exquisite irony: Just when we stopped wanting to kill ourselves, we started to die. Just when we were feeling strength, it was taken from us.

This should not happen to you.

Talk all you want about youth feeling invincible. Surely, some of us had that bravado. But there was also the dark inner voice telling us we were doomed. And then we were doomed. And then we weren’t.

You should not feel doomed. Not in the same way.

You can only doom yourself.

“Let’s just do it,” one boy says to another.

We yell no.

And when we’re not heard, it hurts even more.

We know that some of you are still scared. We know that some of you are still silent. Just because it’s better now doesn’t mean that it’s good.

Dreaming and loving and screwing. None of these are really identities. Maybe when other people look at us, but not to ourselves. We are so much more complicated than that.

We wish we could offer you a creation myth, an exact reason why you are the way you are, why when you read this sentence, you will know it’s about you. But we don’t know how it began. We don’t know how it will end. We barely understood the time that we knew.

You will miss the taste of Froot Loops.

You will miss the sound of traffic.

You will miss your back against his.
You will even miss him stealing the sheets,
Do not ignore these things.

At the risk of sounding old, we have to say: It's far too easy to get porn nowadays. We could drag out that first thrill—the quickly glanced magazine at the newsstand, the elaborately planned mail order—for years. Now it wears off in days. We're glad that it's less taboo. But how sad to deprive it of all mystery, to freight sex so early with explicit expectation.

Ricky Schiller, we see you. We're not above peeking over your shoulder.

Really, you need to get out more.

There are few things that can make us quite as happy as a gay prom.

Tonight we're in a town with the improbable name of Kindling—surely the pioneers had a fiery death wish. Somewhere along the way, someone must have learned the third little pig's lesson, since the community center is built entirely of bricks. It's a dull, quiet building in a dull, quiet town—its architecture as beautiful as the word municipal. It is an unlikely place for a blue-haired boy and a pink-haired boy to meet.

Kindling does not have enough gay kids to support a prom on its own. So tonight, the cars drive in from minutes—sometimes hours—away. Some of the couples drive in together, laughing or fighting or pausing in their separate silences. Some of the boys drive in alone—they've snuck out of the house, or they're meeting friends at the community center, or they saw the listing online and decided at the last minute to go. There are boys in tuxedos, boys adorned with flowers, boys wearing torn hoodies, boys in ties as skinny as their jeans, boys in ironic taffeta gowns, boys in unironic taffeta gowns, boys in V-neck T-shirts, boys who feel awkward wearing dress shoes. And girls—girls wearing all these things, driving to the same place.

If we went to our proms, we went with girls. Some of us had a good time; some of us looked back years later and wondered how we had managed to be so oblivious to ourselves. A few of us managed to go with each other, with our best female friends covering as our dates. We were invited to this ritual, but only if we maintained a socially sanctioned fiction. It would have been more likely for Neil Armstrong to invite us to a prom on the moon than it was for us to go to a prom like the one being held in Kindling tonight.
When we were in high school, hair existed on the bland spectrum of black/brown/orange/blond/gray/white. But tonight in Kindling we have Ryan walking into the community center with his hair dyed a robin's-egg blue. Ten minutes later, Avery walks in with his hair the color of a Mary Kay Cadillac. Ryan's hair is spiked like the surface of a rocky ocean, while Avery's swoops gently over his eyes. Ryan is from Kindling and Avery is from Marigold, a town forty miles away. We can tell immediately that they've never met, and that they are going to.

We are not unanimous about the hair. Some of us think it is ridiculous to have blue hair or pink hair. Others of us wish we could go back and make our hair mimic the Jell-O our mothers would serve us in the afternoon.

We are rarely unanimous about anything. Some of us loved. Some of us were in love. Some of us loved. Some of us never understood what the fuss was about. Some of us wanted it so badly that we died trying. Some of us swear we died of heartbreak, not AIDS.

Ryan walks into the prom, and then Avery walks in ten minutes later. We know what's going to happen. We have seen this scene so many times before. We just don't know if it will work, or if it will last.

We think of the boys we kissed, the boys we screwed, the boys we loved, the boys who didn't love us back, the boys who were with us at the end, the boys who were with us beyond the end. Love is so painful, how could you ever wish it on anybody? And love is so essential, how could you ever stand in its way?

Ryan and Avery do not see us. They do not know us, or need us, or feel us in the room. They don't even see each other until about twenty minutes into the prom. Ryan sees Avery over the head of a thirteen-year-old boy in (it's true, so gay) rainbow suspenders. He spots Avery's hair first, then Avery. And Avery looks up at just that moment, and sees the blue-haired boy glancing his way.

Some of us applaud. Others look away, because it hurts too much.

We always underestimated our own participation in magic. That is, we thought of magic as something inherent, something that existed with or without us. But that's simply not true. Things are not magical because they've been conjured or created for us by some outside force. They are magical because we create them and then deem them so. Ryan and Avery will say the first moment they spoke, the first moment they danced, was magical. But
Sometimes you glimpse that horror. Someone gets sick. Someone gets sent to war. Someone takes his own life. Every day a new funeral. It was such a large part of our existence. You have no idea how fast things can change. You have no idea how suddenly years can pass and lives can end.

Ignorance is not bliss. Bliss is knowing the full meaning of what you have been given.

We watch you, but we don't intervene. We have already done our part. Just as you are doing your part, whether you know it or not, whether you mean to or not, whether you want to or not.

Choose your actions wisely.

There will come a time—perhaps even by the time you read this—when people will no longer be on Facebook. There will come a time when the stars of High School Musical will be sixty. There will come a time when you will have the same inalienable rights as your straightest friend. (Probably before any of the stars of High School Musical turns sixty.) There will
come a time when the gay prom won’t have to be separate. There will come a time when you will be able to listen to any song ever recorded or watch any movie ever made, no matter where you are. There will come a time when you will worry about being forgotten. There will come a time when the gospel will be rewritten.

If you play your cards right, the next generation will be so much different from your own.

On the day that Ryan and Avery get married at a church in South Carolina, they will read for their vows a poem written by Ricky Schiller. When Avery gets to the last line, his best man, Erik Johnson, will have a tear in his eye. Not from loneliness—he will be happily single his whole life—but from the perfection of the moment. In the seventh row, Neil Hayden will find himself wondering about his high-school boyfriend, Peter . . . and three months later, he will be walking through a park and Peter’s dog will run over to him, and bring her owner along, too.

Amazing, no?
Welcome to the attainable world.

We saw our friends die. But we also see our friends live. So many of them live, and we often toast their long and full lives. They carry us on.

There is the sudden. There is the eventual.
And in between, there is the living.

We do not start as dust. We do not end as dust. We make more than dust.
That’s all we ask of you: Make more than dust.
TREV

BY JACQUELINE WOODSON
The first dream came when I was five years old. Already, only in kindergarten, I was a head taller than the other students and sharing shoes with my ten-year-old brother. When my teacher first saw me, she stuttered, looking from me to my information in her book—Girl, it must have said. Or Female. Or She.

But kindergarten didn’t last. Kindergarten was dangerous. On the first day a girl in a pink dress, her hair tied with too many ribbons, stopped me at the bathroom door. You are so not coming in here, she said, glaring at my khaki pants, my blue-striped button-down shirt, my new cowboy boots. We were sent to the bathroom in partners, and my partner, a girl named Rose who held my hand with her sweaty own as we walked down the hallway, let go of my hand quickly when the pink child spoke. Then Rose moved to stand beside the girl, her hand fluttering gently up to the ribbons.

When I pushed past the pink girl, I pushed her down. When she was down, I didn’t know that I hated her for her too many ribbons, for every pink dress she’d ever worn and stepped out proudly in, for her hand blocking my entrance, for the way she said You are so not... Because I was. I was going into that bathroom. I was going to walk where I wanted. I was going to kick her until someone pulled me off.

I hated her because I am.

Kindergarten was dangerous because I didn’t know the rules. And because of this, I was given another year at home to learn them, to understand. Another year away from girls in pink dresses saying how and when.

And now, here I was, a first grader with a note from my mother. Please excuse my daughter’s lateness to her first day. The day started out wrong. But the day had begun as any other day—my brother’s rage hot in the room. You must be happy if you think I’m walking to school with her. My mother’s frustration. Wear the dress, Trev, it’s your first day. And me, all of six and already rooted. Hell no, Ma.

Our family is like that.

All summer long my brother had managed to avoid me—turning corners when he saw me coming, heading upstairs if he saw me heading down, walking out the
back door as I entered the front, tossing the remote on the couch and leaving the TV room when I came into it. . . . Always the summer had been coming to this moment—when he entered fourth grade and I entered first. The school-bus ride, the walking me down the hall and to my class, the handing me off to my teacher, his queer little sister who screamed when her mother suggested a cornflower blue dress—that’s what she’d called it, cornflower—as if the color or the flower made any sense. Corn. Flower. Cornflower blue. What the hell is wrong with you? my mother said, and even though she wasn’t supposed to, she lit a cigarette in front of us and took a deep drag of it before tossing the dress on the couch.

What the hell is wrong with you? I didn’t move. Just folded my arms and stared at her. There was a knife in my pocket. A penknife my friend Alex had given me. Red handled and sharpened all summer long on the curb outside our house. The blade was as thin as a razor. I fingered the handle—cool and smooth.

Then you figure out what the hell you’re wearing, my mother said.

And I did. So here I was, standing in front of this pretty new teacher, the scent of my father’s Domme hair products wafting from my curls, the top button left just so, and my skin showing through it—caramel, golden, nut brown, honey, depending on who was looking and what mood they were in. . . .

But it was not the note my mother wrote that threw her—I know this now. It was the jeans and the button-down shirt and the hair, cut short over my ears and the right curls just on top. Daughter? her eyes said. But she was young and pretty and it was her first year teaching, so her lips trembled up into a smile.

Trev, I said. Trev Louis Johnson.

Six years before, on a cloudy day in June—too cold for June, my mother said—I was born Trevana Louise Johnson. For my father, Trevor. For my mother, Dana. His father was Trevor, too. Her grandmother Dane Alise. The line goes back and back until old people can’t remember where it started. I was born a combination of grandmothers and grandfathers and blood and vowels mixing until I came into this world—a new combination of black and white, of my mother’s dark skin and my father’s pale. Dark-eyed and already mad about something, my mother said.

I knew I wasn’t right.

Have a seat right here, Trev, my teacher said. And
in the way of great first-grade teachers everywhere, she folded herself around this daughter-boy that was me.

That night, in the dream, I unzipped my six-year-old self and stepped out—free.

_Breathe_, my mother said. _Just breathe._

That summer before, as my brother ran away from me, I had learned to breathe—first with my mother and when that wasn't enough, then with Dr. K, who had me draw pictures and choose clothes from wooden crates and play pretend with pale bendable dolls. Dr. K, with her patient _Do you want to talk about it?_, to which the answer was always _No_, but somehow the words made their way into the room. _I'm wrong down there._

All summer long _I'm wrong down there_, until Dr. K with her limber dolls and button-down dress-up shirts and mirrors and words showed me that other world, the world inside the world.

Each night thereafter, I closed my eyes, took deep breaths until in that place between sleep and wake, I unzipped this world I wore.

And now, a year since my first day as a kindergartner, I was allowed back again—a first grader—taller, breathing, a knife in my pocket as sharp as my brother’s rage. But it was all different. My father—the Trev part of me—had left in late July, a small suitcase packed, a kiss on each of our foreheads, my mother turning away from the window in tears. My father’s world inside his world was crumbling. He had dreamed me pink and girly. He had dreamed princess parties and sweet sixteens, a wedding dance before handing me off to his new and beloved son-in-law. He’d said this: _She'll kill me. I'm a man and my little girl is killing me._ But in my world inside my world, I knew he wasn’t talking about me, because I wasn’t his little girl. I was Trev. And Trev was not a girl.

Dr. K had sat them down, slowly re-explained me.

_But you can fix that, can't you?_ my father had asked.

_Can't someone fix her?_  

_Trev is Trev_, Dr. K had said. _Let him be so._

And my father pressed his face into his hands and cried.

_I am not a little girl._

_You're a fuckin' freak!_ my brother had screamed. And for days our house was filled with a silence so sharp at its edges, so cold. For days our house was as cold and fragile as glass.

_You chased him away_, my brother said, but my mother shook her head.
Your father was already halfway gone.

In first grade, my teacher was Ms. Riley. Call me Ms. R, she said, or Ms. Riley or Cara, if you like.

Cara? we said, our eyebrows knitting up, our hands going over our mouths. Cara was too human, too right here and now. Teachers weren't Cara.

Cara, she said. It was my grandmother's name.

Then we spent time talking about where our names came from, whether or not we liked them, what we'd change them to. And when I told the history of my name, the class listened, some even smiled at me.

Dane had come before me. She was my mother's great-aunt, tall and cigar smoking and handsome. She laughed with her head thrown back and wore her hair cut low. In the pictures, Dane looks directly into the camera as though she's daring something to come closer. It's like she's wearing a shield, right? I asked my brother one night when he was still a friend of mine. But he couldn't see it. Couldn't see that Dane was a true-blue superhero.

Maybe I'll be a superhero, too.

Some nights, I dreamed I was flying above the world, my cape trailing out behind me, silver-gray and shining in the moonlight. I dreamed I looked down and saw others like me and I called to them and they flew up and joined me, and together we circled the earth all night long. And the world was safe. And we were safe.

What happened to Dane? I ask my mother, staring at the picture of her for the hundred-thousandth time.

She cut a man, my mother says. And they took her away. And when she got out, she never came home again. Mama looks at the picture and smiles. I like to think she found a friendlier place somewhere. She had a hard time in our town. But she handled it. She was something else, that Dane.

Why'd she cut that man?

He probably made her mad. Said something he didn't have a right to be saying to her.

In school sometimes, I touch the knife in my pocket, feel the smooth handle, think about the sharp edge of the blade. One day my mother will find it and lose her mind. Smack me or light up a cigarette or sit down and cry.

Is that thing your sister or brother or whatever it is? the older kids ask my brother sometimes.

Hell no, he says, flicking his eyes away from me, out into the schoolyard, over the other kids who walk the world all lost or safe inside their skin.
On the second day of school, the day that was my first, I walked with a new partner, Raymond, down the hall to the boys' bathroom. When I stepped inside and closed the stall door, I smiled. I was home.

Each night, when my mother kisses my cheek, she pulls the covers up to my ears and whispers, *I wish on eyelashes and birthday candles, tomorrow you'll be my sugar and spice and everything nice.* Then, I turn onto my back, close my eyes, and breathe deeply until the dream is there.

And in the dream, I am a boy, truly, everywhere. In the dream, no one looks twice at me. No one laughs. No little girl screams, no brother turns away. In the dream, there is one world, the right one, and superhero me has swooped down.

And saved it from mortal destruction.