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# Hidden in Plain Sight: Gay and Lesbian Books in Midwestern Public Libraries, 1900–1969

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the collections of five rural midwestern public libraries to assess the presence of books with gay and lesbian content in the pre-Stonewall era. It considers how reviewers writing for standard library review sources (*A.L.A. Catalog*, *Booklist*, and H. W. Wilson's *Fiction Catalog*) described these works. Throughout the first six decades of the twentieth century, most gay and lesbian titles remained as closeted in the review sources as did the readers who sought them. Professional training contributed to a librarian's willingness to consider the purchase of such titles, but larger cultural factors shaped the context in which librarians and reviewers worked. While there may have been some intentional efforts to prevent such works from being reviewed, other factors kept books from the shelves, including the privately printed nature of some works, a library's practice of purchasing hardcover rather than paperback books, and the invisibility of gay and lesbian content to heterosexual reviewers. Thus, only the most sensational titles or the most innocuous works tended to find their way to the library's shelves.

After spending a day at the Detroit Public Library in the mid-1940s, twelve-year-old Barbara Grier returned home and informed her mother she was a homosexual. Fortunately for Grier, her mother possessed some awareness of homosexuality from reading such novels as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Marcia Davenport's *Of Lena Geyer* (1936). After responding that the correct label was "lesbian," Mrs. Grier suggested to her daughter that they "wait six months before telling the newspapers" (Barbara Grier, personal communication, May 15, 2010).

Barbara Grier represents just one of countless twentieth-century gays and lesbians who turned to books for confirmation of their existence and

validation of their identities. For much of the twentieth century, however, gay and lesbian readers had limited access to books containing representations of gay and lesbian life. The genre we now label “gay and lesbian literature” developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, but it was not until the 1950s, with the advent of pulp fiction, that gay and lesbian titles began gaining greater visibility, if not acceptance. Indeed, the inability to locate gay and lesbian publications led pioneering lesbian bibliographer Jeannette Howard Foster to devote several decades to scouring such comprehensive resources as *Booklist*, the *Cumulative Book Index*, *Library Journal*, the *National Union Catalog*, *Publishers’ Weekly*, and *Wilson Library Bulletin* for titles with potential gay and lesbian content. *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, the product of Foster’s tenacity and superb skills of detection, appeared in 1956 and in time became known as “the Bible of lesbian literature.” Despite this breakthrough, however, it was not until after the Stonewall Riot of 1969 that gay and lesbian publications began gaining widespread visibility in American culture.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, urban women and men have had more opportunities to self-define as gay or lesbian than their rural counterparts. Access to information about sexuality, opportunities for social contact with other gays and lesbians, and the availability of public meeting spaces facilitate individual as well as group identity formation. As library historian James V. Carmichael, Jr., has written in *Daring to Find Our Names*, libraries and the literature they contained have been “historically paramount to the coming out process” (1998, p. 2). Printed works, once obtained, offered a path to self-discovery because they could be consumed in private; they also functioned as platforms for discussing issues with others. As Paulette Rothbauer argues, empowerment by the act of reading enables socially marginalized populations to find understanding, to question power dynamics, and to begin cultivating a sense of community (2007). Unfortunately, as John Pruitt’s study of gay men’s book clubs and Wisconsin public libraries suggests, librarians in rural America were “complicit with overlooking homosexual histories, cultures, and reading habits” for much of the twentieth century (2010, p. 123). As a result, rural gays and lesbians not only experienced greater isolation but also feared discovery by less-than-sympathetic neighbors.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on the rural gay and lesbian experience, exploring such issues as rural isolation and lack of equal access to health care and social services.<sup>3</sup> Relatively little is known about the availability of books with gay and lesbian content to readers in rural America, let alone the role public libraries played in facilitating gay and lesbian identity formation among that population. Admittedly, not all gays and lesbians were readers, but those who were either turned to such periodicals as *The Ladder* and *One*, or diligently searched books for glimpses of others like themselves.<sup>4</sup> But what role did rural libraries

play in addressing this need? One way to approach this question is by exploring the presence of books with gay and lesbian content in five small town midwestern public libraries during the first seven decades of the twentieth century. It considers the degree to which such books were treated in the professional review sources librarians used to build their collections, as well as the messages these titles conveyed about gay and lesbian life.

Several bibliographers have compiled lists of gay and lesbian titles, but since none matched the parameters of this study (1900–1969), I began by compiling a 450-item checklist of gay and lesbian novels. For lesbian titles, I turned to Jeannette Howard Foster's path-breaking *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956) and Barbara Grier's *The Lesbian in Literature* (1981), and for gay male novels, I consulted Anthony Slide's *Lost Gay Novels: A Reference Guide to Fifty Works from the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (2003). I also added several volumes of lesbian poetry and bestselling nonfiction titles to my checklist, including Donald Cory Webster's *The Lesbian in America* (1964) and Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953).

Using the checklist, I searched the contents of Wayne A. Wiegand's Main Street Public Library database of five midwestern communities' library acquisition records. They range from Lexington, Michigan, a lakeside tourist destination with fewer than 1,000 residents during the period under consideration, to Morris, Illinois, with a population of approximately 12,000. Rhinelander, Wisconsin, served a region known for lumbering, and Osage, Iowa, stood in the midst of farmland. The fifth town, Sauk Centre, Minnesota, is best known today as the birthplace to author Sinclair Lewis and the model for his fictional town of Gopher Prairie. Collectively these libraries purchased a scant 62 titles from the 450-item checklist, or less than .00065 percent of their combined holdings.

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Professionally trained librarians of the pre-Stonewall twentieth century relied on several key bibliographic guides when selecting books for their collections. With the exception of the Moore Public Library in Lexington, Michigan, all of the libraries in this study employed women with some professional library school training. Librarians in Rhinelander usually had studied at the Wisconsin Library School; after 1933, those in Sauk Centre had graduated from the Minnesota Library School; and librarians in Osage and Morris had summer library school courses at local universities. During their coursework, they learned to trust the recommendations of *Booklist* magazine and such professionally revered bibliographic guides as the *A.L.A. Catalog* and the H.W. Wilson Company's *Public Library Catalog* and *Fiction Catalog*. Collectively, these selection tools represent the key sources librarians consulted when building collections. Indeed,

nearly sixty percent of the books with gay and lesbian content purchased by these librarians were reviewed in these sources.

Prior to 1920, these five Midwestern libraries acquired only four of the fourteen novels listed in the checklist, a reflection upon that era's ambivalent attitude toward gays and lesbians. Reviewers seldom commented on homosexual content, focusing instead on a story's narrative or characters. Continuing the nineteenth-century trend that historian Carroll Smith Rosenberg has described as the "female world of love and ritual," these novels alluded to same-sex emotional attachment rather than physical intimacy (1975, p. 1). Typical of the era, Josephine Dodge Dascom's *Smith College Stories* (1900) and a British novel by Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler entitled *The Farringdons* (1900) portrayed homosocial attachment in a girls' boarding school setting, while in contrast, Henry Kitchell Webster's *The Real Adventure* (1916) offered a pejorative account of lesbian behavior linked to sickness. A reviewer for *Catholic World* found the latter book lacking in reality, noting that it taught "what the modern unmoral woman is capable of doing" (Review of *The Real Adventure*, June 1916), while the *A.L.A. Booklist* pronounced it "a thoughtful study" (Review of *The Real Adventure*, March 1916). Only one title, John Buchan's popular spy novel *Greenmantle* (1916), portrayed a gay male. Readers across America devoured the story of protagonist Richard Hannay confronting his nemesis, a German Colonel, who despite his status as the enemy and as a homosexual, was portrayed as strong, brave, and courageous. Librarians consulting the *A.L.A. Booklist* in April 1917 would have seen the book praised for its "clean cut, sustained excitement" (Review of *Greenmantle*, 1917).

World War I marked a turning point in the production of books with gay and lesbian content, with the war contributing to a cross-fertilization of literature and a loosening of attitudes toward the discussion of sexuality. With the popularization of Freudian psychology in the 1910s and 1920s, some women and men came to view homosexuality as an arrested stage of development or as a neurosis that could be treated and cured. The overall relaxation of sexual standards is evident in the popular culture of the 1920s. Gay and lesbian references, for instance, punctuate the lyrics of the song, "Masculine Women, Feminine Men" (1926); Mae West's 1927 play, "The Drag"; and publicity about William Haines and other openly gay actors and actresses (Mann, W. J., 1998, pp. 12, 13, 80).

The inclusion of gays and lesbians in literary works further contributed to an increased awareness of homosexuality throughout the 1920s. Early in the decade, reviewers for *Booklist* and the *A.L.A. Catalog* focused on the eccentric nature of fictional characters in these works, describing them as quirky yet delightful. As the decade progressed, however, reviewers conveyed a more negative tone by increased use of words like "sinister," "frank," and "daring." Lesbian visibility peaked in 1928 with British publication of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1929), the first major

novel in English with a pro-lesbian theme. Banned in England as obscene, Hall's book became a best seller in the United States and helped define lesbianism in the twentieth century. In 1928 and 1929, numerous articles about the book appeared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and may have piqued readers' curiosity in Morris, Osage, and Rhinelander, whose public libraries subscribed to that paper.<sup>5</sup> None of the libraries in this study purchased Hall's novel in the 1920s, but readers could have discovered five other gay and lesbian titles in Sauk Centre, four in Morris, three in Rhinelander, and two in Osage. It is worth noting that Sauk Centre also acquired Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* and *Elmer Gantry*, both banned in a number of public libraries.

Both the Rhinelander and Sauk Centre librarians acquired Rosamond Lehmann's widely reviewed *Dusty Answer* (1927), a novel that illuminated the negative consequences of lesbian urges by having the novel's protagonist suffer a nervous breakdown after experiencing same-sex desire. It is impossible to determine if these Midwest librarians encountered *New York Tribune* reviewer Stephen Vincent Binet's warning that some readers might find certain passages "distasteful," but the professionally trained librarians in Rhinelander and Sauk Centre also purchased Clarkson Crane's *The Western Shore* (1925), a college drama featuring a gay Berkeley professor fond of young men (Binet, 1925). None of the standard library review sources included this work. In Morris, the librarian acquired M. A. DeWolfe Howe's *Memories of a Hostess* (1922) and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowses* (1926), both of which received positive reviews in *Booklist*. The librarian in Osage purchased Helen Rose Hull's *Labryinth* (1923), ignored by *Booklist*, and her counterpart in Sauk Centre added Virginia Woolf's widely reviewed *Orlando* (1928). Noted for its sophistication, the latter novel explored gender and sexual identity and the relationship of intersexual traits to creative ability. *Booklist* also ignored Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat* (1924), which both Osage and Sauk Centre purchased. When it became a Broadway play in 1925 and a Hollywood film in 1928, the scriptwriters took care to obscure references to homosexuality in this portrayal of the lost generation.

As the United States entered the decade-long Great Depression of the 1930s, a nationwide striving for normalcy encouraged the literary exaltation of marriage and family life. According to Roger Austen, mainstream publishers remained receptive to novels with homosexual motifs "as long as the gay angle was sufficiently subordinated to grander themes" (1977, p. 74). Lesbian themes appeared in nine of the eleven titles acquired during this decade, yet collectively they continued to convey an ominous message. According to bibliographer Jeannette Howard Foster, Colette's *Claudine at School* (1930) is the least damning, suggesting that "lesbian attractions are legitimate but they belong to youth" (1956, p. 200). On the other hand, Sinclair Lewis's *Ann Vickers* (1933), Lillian Hellman's *The*

*Children's Hour* (1934), and Frances Young's *White Ladies* (1935) portray a dark and foreboding image of lesbians as "vampires, living on young blood," and they hint that the women's desperation-filled lives will end in suicide (Foster, 1956, pp. 315–316). In other works, gay males appear as disreputable characters. George Davis's depiction of a gay alcoholic uncle in *The Opening of a Door*, for instance, sends a clear message that people like him are not "fit to live among decent men and women!" (1931, p. 135). Librarians who relied on *Booklist* or the *A.L.A. Catalog* would have encountered such advice as "for discriminating readers" or coded references to characters being "precocious," "eccentric," "unconventional," and "neurotic."

Wartime paper shortages limited book publication in the early 1940s, but fiction with gay and lesbian characters appeared in record numbers during the second half of the decade. According to literary historian Ray Lewis White, World War II led Americans "to write seriously and to read understandingly" about homosexual life, in part, because the military prompted recruits to define their sexuality (White, 1968, pp. 49–50). Additionally, the relocation of rural men and women to urban areas brought them into contact with gays and lesbians and contributed to a growing awareness of homosexuality. The publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 fueled further discussions of sexual behavior in general and homosexuality in particular. In the postwar years, reviewers increasingly offered frank assessments of works with gay and lesbian themes or characters, describing homosexuality as a "strange friendship," yet one treated by novelists with "sympathetic understanding" (*Fiction Catalog*, p. 246, and Review of *The Folded Leaf*, 1945). Nonetheless, they excluded some works, among them Richard Brooks's *Brick Foxhole* (1945), perhaps out of a desire to protect readers from literature they regarded as morally suspect.

None of the libraries in this study purchased Alfred Kinsey's controversial and widely publicized tome, but they did acquire an unprecedented seventeen novels from the forty titles on my checklist that were published during the 1940s. Ten appeared in the standard sources librarians consulted when making book selection decisions. That these rural librarians added six of these titles to their collections in 1945 alone suggests a temporary loosening of sexual mores. Indeed, in 1945 the librarians in Rhinelander and Sauk Centre finally decided to purchase Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, originally published seventeen years earlier.

The availability of books featuring fictional gays and lesbians increased in the immediate aftermath of World War II, but the prevailing message to readers remained negative. Richard Brooks's *The Brick Foxhole* (1945), acquired by the Rhinelander and Sauk Centre libraries, recounts the murder of a gay interior decorator who picks up soldiers. A reviewer for the

*New Republic* dismissed it as “pretentious,” yet suggested that the story of implied homosexuality “must have occurred to any number of soldiers in the armed forces” (Berstein, 1945). The Osage library purchased Isabel Bolton’s *The Christmas Tree* (1949), labeled “a morality play for moderns” in *Library Journal* (Forbes, 1949). Mary B. Miller, writing under the pseudonym Isabel Bolton, believed her story of a gay man who kills his lover by pushing him over a balcony illustrated “part of the monstrous, wholesale and unspeakable melodrama that was afflicting the world today” (Bolton, 1949, p. 211).

Fictional lesbians of the 1940s appeared less dangerous than their male counterparts. In Dorothy Cowlin’s *Winter Solstice* (1943), for instance, a same-sex romantic attachment cures a woman after eight years of invalidism, but the relationship is brief and ends when both women marry. The librarian in Sauk Centre purchased Cowlin’s novel even though *Booklist* ignored it and the *New York Times* reviewer observed that it was “not everyone’s dish” (Wallace, 1943). Meanwhile, most of the devoted readers who devoured Gladys Tabor’s charming tales of life at Stillmeadow probably remained unaware of its mild-mannered presentation of lesbian companionship. Readers who sought franker portrayals of lesbianism had to look elsewhere, beyond their public library shelves.

The golden era of 1940s gay and lesbian fiction ended abruptly in the early 1950s with Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy’s homophobic purges of federal agencies and the increased focus on homosexuality as a sinister sickness. Expected to serve as conservators of morality, librarians in these five communities—including those professionally trained—remained slow to spend taxpayer money on sexually controversial materials despite the American Library Association’s strong stand against censorship in its 1939 “Library Bill of Rights.” Indeed, the acquisition of gay and lesbian titles dwindled significantly at a time when being suspected of homosexuality could lead to dismissal from one’s position. Excluding gay and lesbian titles from standard review sources further rendered them virtually invisible. Of the fifty-five checklist titles published during the 1950s, only two had reviews appearing in *Booklist*.

In keeping with the climate of the times, none of the novels these libraries acquired during the 1950s dealt with homosexuality in a substantive or insightful way. A *Library Journal* review of N. Martin Kramer’s *The Hearth and the Strangeness* (1956), for instance, cautioned about the book’s sexual explicitness, but stopped short of mentioning homosexuality (Bresler, 1955, p. 2861). In contrast, the reviewer for *Library Journal* cautioned that Helga Sandburg’s *The Wheel of Earth* (1958) included “rape, illegitimacy, accidental death, insanity, Lesbianism, and suicide” (Barrett, 1958, p. 1231). This did not deter librarians in Osage and Rhinelander from adding it to their collections, perhaps because Sandburg was the daughter of the much loved Midwest poet Carl Sandburg.

Two libraries purchased Gladys Taber's *Mrs. Daffodil* (1957), praised for its "wholesome sentiment," but readers who wanted more sexually suggestive content had to turn to the emerging pulp fiction market, which published its first lesbian title, Tereska Torres's *Women's Barracks*, in 1950 (Walbridge, 1957).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, argues Yvonne Keller, pulp fiction was responsible for playing a major role in identity formation, helping to popularize the word "lesbian," and ensuring that images of lesbian life, no matter how tawdry, reached a mass audience (2005). Such works, however, were easier to obtain in urban settings than in these rural communities.

The rise of social movements in the 1960s marked the beginning of significant changes in the nature of public library collections. While the overall numbers of gay and lesbian titles acquired remained small, the librarians in these five communities collectively purchased twenty-one titles, only one-third of which were critiqued in standard library review sources like *Booklist* and *Fiction Catalog*. By the 1960s, reviewers more openly discussed the presence of homosexuality in a novel, but they nonetheless conveyed a tone of disapproval by describing content with such words as "shocking" and "disturbing." *Booklist* did not review Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, which tells the story of eight Vassar graduates—one of whom is a lesbian. Omission from library review sources and negative comments about the book's shocking content and literary inferiority in such national magazines as *Newsweek*, *The New Republic*, and *Saturday Review* did not deter librarians in Lexington, Osage, and Rhinelander from purchasing the best-selling novel.

With few exceptions, most of the 104 checklist titles acquired during the 1960s failed to seriously grapple with the question of gay and lesbian identity. In Rhinelander, the few readers who may have recognized the muted lesbian content in the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen's earlier novel, *The Hotel* (1927), would have found the sexuality portrayed in *The Little Girls* (1963) even more ambiguous. Bowen's later work, which *Booklist* did not review, features a character merely inquiring if another is a lesbian. Such passing references to same-sex love did not alarm the reviewer for *Best Sellers*, who focused his comments on the "imaginative" nature of the novel's three main characters who "might in life, only emerge on a psychiatrist's couch" (Oppenheim, 1964). A growing fascination with women's history and lesbianism in the 1960s fueled some interest in Greek poet Sappho of Lesbos and led to the reprinting of Mary Barnard's 1958 translation of her poems. Peter Green's fictionalized account of Sappho's life, *The Laughter of Aphrodite*, followed in 1965, and Rhinelander's librarian purchased both titles. Reviewers of Green's novel commended the author for his courageous effort to write about a woman for whom so little was known, but stressed that "his Sappho is not likable, not at all someone you sympathize with, and this, I think, is as it should be" (Casson, 1966, p. 40).

In the 1960s, librarians acquired the work of nationally known and respected authors, even those exploring gay and lesbian issues. James Baldwin is a case in point. Beginning with his *Giovanni's Room* (1956), he increasingly incorporated graphic realism into his fictional portrayals of gays and lesbians. Six years later, his novel *Another Country* broke dual barriers with its frank portrayal of bisexuality and interracial relations. While none of the libraries in this study purchased *Giovanni's Room*, both the Lexington and Rhinelander librarians acquired *Another Country* even though it was ignored by *Booklist* and condemned by reviewers like the *Christian Science Monitor's* Roderick Nordell as "obscene and bitter" (1962, p. 11). Taking a middle ground, *Library Journal* book critic and advocate of intellectual freedom Eric Moon advised librarians that *Another Country* was "another 'problem' book—all the [Henry] Miller vocabulary, race, and the gamut of sex from near-rape to the homosexual." "The discriminating . . . reader," he advised, "will still be disappointed if he doesn't get a chance to see this latest work of one of our best young writers" (Moon, 1962, p. 2154).

While Baldwin's in-your-face treatments of homosexuals and bisexuals attracted widespread comment, May Sarton's positive portrayals of same-sex love between women went relatively undetected. In later years, when Sarton reflected on her career, she identified the autobiographical *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* (1965) as her literary "coming out." Only Rhinelander purchased the novel that led to Sarton's dismissal from a teaching position. *Booklist* chose to ignore it while Maggie Rennert, writing for *Book Week*, dismissively observed that "what goes on among half-people whose nether regions are fused and fishily armored has damned little to do with the rest of us" (1965, 38). On the other hand, there were a few dissenting voices. R. P. Corsini, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, praised Sarton for handling "a difficult theme" well (1965, p. 53).

During the first five decades of the twentieth century, the librarians in Morris, Osage, Rhinelander, and Sauk Centre acquired small numbers of books with gay and lesbian content, but the librarian of the Moore Library in the Lake Huron resort community of Lexington, Michigan, selected few controversial titles, let alone those with gay and lesbian content. As library historian Wayne Wiegand finds in a study of the Moore Library's first fifty years, the librarian selected only 3 titles from 370 identified as indecent by a Roman Catholic organization, the National Organization for Decent Literature (Wiegand, 2011). It was not until 1961, when the librarian purchased Noel Coward's widely reviewed *Pomp and Circumstance* (1960), that gay and lesbian titles appeared in the collection. Coward's dialogue was full of sexual nuances and double entendres, but a reviewer for *Library Journal* nonetheless pronounced it "entertaining and fun" and recommended it for "most general fiction collections" (Mann, C. W., 1960, p. 4162). Tourist demand may have prompted the addition of several

other timely titles, among them Baldwin's *Another Country*, McCarthy's *The Group* (1963), and Donald Webster Cory's *The Lesbian in America* (1964), none of which were reviewed in *Booklist*.

Given the relatively latent homosexual content in most of the novels purchased during the 1960s, their inclusion in these five libraries suggests that the subject matter of homosexuality was beginning to permeate popular culture, not that a dramatic watershed in book review or collection development policies had occurred. That would have to wait for another decade. In Osage, Iowa, for instance, the librarian purchased a handful of titles including Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1962), May Sarton's *Small Room* (1961), and C. P. Snow's *The Sleep of Reason* (1968). Only Jackson's work prompted reviewers to comment on the presence of "lesbian affection that is meant to be sophisticated, but is usually embarrassing," so there is no assurance that the local librarian possessed any particular awareness that these books might be of interest to her gay and lesbian readers (Geismar, 1959).

Acquisition records from Morris, Illinois, further suggest that rural midwestern librarians, for the most part, did not consciously attempt to provide readers with insight into the question of sexual identity. Readers in Morris could stumble upon the three works with latent homosexual content (mentioned above) acquired in the 1960s, but it is more likely that they would have encountered the library's copy of *Growing Up Straight: What Every Thoughtful Parent Should Know about Homosexuality* (1968), a book dedicated to identification and correction of homosexuality in one's offspring.

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Analysis of the acquisition records of five midwestern libraries during the first six decades of the twentieth century reveal some commonalities. First, such works were relatively invisible in the standard library review sources, with only twelve percent of the gay and lesbian titles selected by these librarians reviewed in *Booklist*, *Fiction Catalog*, and the *A.L.A. Catalogs* published between 1926 and 1949. Invisibility, rather than reviewers' warnings, contributed to the paucity of titles acquired. The books were as closeted as the characters they described.

Second, librarians do not appear to have consciously sought out works with gay and lesbian content; instead, it is more likely that the items they chose had been written by popular authors or because they represented a high-demand genre such as mystery or detective fiction. Three of the five libraries, for instance, acquired John Buchan's commercially successful spy novel *Greenmantle* (1916). And in the 1950s, the acquisition of Helga Sandburg's *The Wheel of Earth* was more likely due to her status as Carl Sandburg's daughter than it was for her novel's theme or quality.

Third, librarians appear to have collected such established writers as

May Sarton and James Baldwin regardless of the subject matter, as well as books by promising new writers who received excellent early reviews. In the 1930s, for instance, the librarians in several of these communities purchased George Davis's *The Opening of a Door* (1931), praised by reviewers for its stunning prose, "quiet pride," "unassailable integrity," and "warmth" that lifted it from "admirable into that of the really moving" (Dawson, 1931). Reviewers did not openly discuss the book's treatment of homosexuality, but the knowing reader would have discovered many subtle hints, including the title. Likewise, librarians of the 1940s acquired Christopher LaFarge's highly praised *The Sudden Guest* (1946), noted more for its skillful depiction of a hurricane than for any depiction of relationships.

As interesting as it may be to consider the titles that librarians purchased, it also is instructive to explore the works and authors they did not select for their collections. Few would have possessed knowledge of privately printed gay and lesbian books and pulp fiction, or of novels by authors like Ronald Firbank, known for portraying homosexuals, lesbians, and bisexuals as chic. If they relied on *Booklist*, they would have known of Firbank's existence, but anyone who read *Time Magazine* could have seen his work described as "vicious or blasphemous" (Review of *The Complete Ronald Firbank*, 1961). None of the librarians in these five communities purchased Mary Renault's *The Charioteer*, a bold portrayal of male homosexuality during World War II, perhaps because *Booklist* did not review it and reviewer Charlotte Georgi cautioned *Library Journal* readers that the novel belonged in larger libraries with "sophisticated collections" and, one presumes, sophisticated readers (1959).

These midwestern public librarians also did not acquire the work of noted lesbians Djuna Barnes (whose critically acclaimed *Ladies Almanack*, a *Roman à Clef* about lesbians in Paris, appeared in 1928), Jane Rule (whose lesbian-themed novel, *The Desert of the Heart*, was "not recommended to those who find sexual perversion an uncomfortable subject)," Gertrude Stein (perhaps best known for *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*), and Patricia Highsmith (author of *The Price of Salt*, a novel with latent lesbian content published in 1952 under the pseudonym "Claire Morgan") (Bresler, 1965).

Clearly, pre-Stonewall-era readers seeking fictional or nonfictional portrayals of gays and lesbians in these five Midwest public libraries would have left disappointed, if not empty-handed. Several factors explain why. First, the negative cultural stigma associated with homosexuality for much of the pre-Stonewall era discouraged small town librarians from acquiring novels known to have gay and lesbian content. It was not unusual for library boards of trustees, typically composed of local civic leaders and prominent club women, to review a librarian's book selection list before she placed the orders. It was well-known that leading librarians and library

board members objected to spending public funds on “immoral” books. Indeed, in 1908, American Library Association president Arthur Bostwick wrote that the New York Public Library (where he worked) did not purchase books “that appear to us to be either immoral or so indecent that they are unfit to be circulated among the general public” (Thistlethwaite, 1994, p. 223). This attitude persisted for decades, leaving librarians well aware they could jeopardize their jobs by including such sexually suggestive titles as *The Flesh Is Willing*, *The Whispered Sex*, *Twilight Men*, or *Return to Lesbos* in selection lists they submitted to their boards for approval.

Second, the selection tools librarians used to build their collections further inhibited the acquisition of works with gay and lesbian content because they tended to review books published by mainstream presses, not works issued by the vanity, paperback, and foreign presses known to be more receptive to publishing gay and lesbian titles. As a result, the works that found their way onto the library shelves tended to be issued by such recognizable presses as Doubleday, Knopf, Macmillan, and Viking. Reflecting on her years of reading hundreds, if not thousands, of book reviews published in the standard reviewing tools, Jeannette Howard Foster concluded that “no class of printed matter except outright pornography . . . suffered more critical neglect, exclusion from libraries, or omission from collected works than variant belles-lettres” during the first five decades of the twentieth century (1956, p. 15). Library subject headings also failed to aid readers reluctant to request a book about homosexuality from the librarian. Subject headings were not assigned to novels, which were cataloged by author and title, and the American library profession did not begin using the subject heading “homosexuality” to catalog non-fiction works until 1946, or “lesbianism” until 1954 (Greenblatt, 1990).

Third, the coded nature of fictional homosexuality led to its relative invisibility for much of this period, with primarily those “in the know”—urban sophisticates, medical practitioners, and gay and lesbian readers like Foster—recognizing its presence. As an examination of reviews for titles known to have gay and lesbian content reveals, reviewers often failed to comment on a work’s treatment of homosexuality—either out of ignorance or intentionally. Even a knowledgeable reader could not be completely certain of an author’s intent. On the rare occasions when reviewers did comment on gay and lesbian characters or themes, they often used pejorative terms or employed coded language that implied homosexuality, for instance, referring to immoral or deviant behavior, or to psychological problems. Under ideal circumstances, the thought processes of librarians making selection decisions about such books would be taken into consideration, and it would be possible to inquire if they recognized these verbal cues, but unfortunately they remain undocumented. Additionally, a librarian’s sexual orientation or commitment to progressive social causes also may have been a factor in selection decisions, but that

information also is missing. Lacking their voices, it is difficult to assess the degree to which the librarians who selected gay and lesbian books during these six decades knew of *sub rosa* gay and lesbian content in novels unless book critics brought it to the public's attention.

Professional training appears to have been an especially important factor contributing to the consistent inclusion of gay and lesbian titles in the Rhinelander Public Library's collection throughout the decades under review. From its inception, this library was directed by Wisconsin Library School graduates who had learned from director Mary Imogene Hazeltine to rely on *Booklist* when selecting books for their collections. As professionally trained librarians, they shared a professional commitment to the freedom to read that to some extent was reflected in the collection's inclusion of material on multiple social issues; however, their commitment did not extend to series and popular fiction. Most gay and lesbian fiction during these decades would have fallen in the latter category. While the number of titles with gay and lesbian content is small when one considers the overall size of the library, Rhinelander led the five libraries of this study with the acquisition of thirty-two distinct titles across six decades. Osage was second with twenty-one titles, followed by Sauk Centre with eighteen and Morris with sixteen. These three libraries were, for the most part, managed by women who attended summer library school courses for practitioners.

The Moore Library in Lexington, Michigan, was managed by a high school graduate from 1911 to 1961, and trailed with eight titles, all acquired in the 1960s as homosexuality began to gain greater attention nationally. She used such external agencies as "Book of the Month Club" to filter her selection decisions. In contrast, Rhinelander's librarians acquired some of the most controversial works published during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, including Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Richard Brooks's *Brick Foxhole*, and James Baldwin's *Another Country*. *Booklist* had reviewed Hall's book seventeen years earlier, but had ignored the titles by Brooks and Baldwin. Nevertheless, librarians would have been aware of them because they were reviewed widely in regional newspapers like the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and in such popular periodicals as *Atlantic*, *The Nation*, *Saturday Review*, and *Time*.

A visitor to the public library today will discover GLBTQ books for teens, Stonewall Honor Books, films, Web resources, and more, but during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, readers found it virtually impossible to obtain information about homosexuality. Readers who stumbled upon the paucity of titles available to them in these five Midwest public libraries would have learned that homosexuality was morally wrong, that homosexuals were socially marginalized and psychologically disturbed, and that the gay and lesbian lifestyle was fraught with difficulty and conflict, likely to result in suicide or murder. Clearly, gay and lesbian

readers constituted an under-represented and often invisible population in the pre-Stonewall-era Midwest. For the most part, librarians did not consciously collect gay and lesbian materials, and the library played a minimal, if that, role in shattering the ignorance surrounding homosexuality. On the other hand, it is possible that some readers who happened upon these covert and overt messages learned to question gender norms and sexual stereotypes.

Like anyone seeking validation of his or her identity, pre-Stonewall-era gays and lesbians, especially those living in the rural Midwest, desperately sought assurance that they were not aberrations. It was not unusual for a rural youth to think that he or she was the only gay or lesbian in the community. Discovery of gay and lesbian books in the library or newsstand, however, provided the language for discussing homosexuality, began the process of altering perceptions, and affirmed the existence of a community that, for the time being, was beyond the reader's immediate reach. After finding a copy of the *Well of Loneliness* at a local drugstore, for instance, Doris Lunden knew that she was not alone, but she had "no inkling how many lesbians there might be." Arden Eversmeyer, who came out during her college years in the late 1940s, recalled that "we didn't even have much of a vocabulary to describe ourselves." She knew of *The Well of Loneliness*, but recalled "most books of that kind would not have been available to just anyone—you had to ask for them" (Arden Eversmeyer, personal communication, May 26, 2010). Likewise, a female student who discovered a nonfiction book on male homosexuality in her college library during the late 1960s read it in the stacks because she lacked the courage to check it out and "was terrified anyone would suspect me" (Maida Tilchen, personal communication, May 13, 2010). Within the library walls, however, she felt safe, and the knowledge she gained from her encounter with that book irreversibly complicated her understanding of sexual identity.

After coming out in 1973, a third woman realized that she had read books with closeted lesbian characters earlier in her life without realizing it. Returning to her hometown library with Jeannette Foster's bibliography of sex-variant literature in hand, she was surprised to discover that it owned many of the titles listed therein. They "were not in any way visible as lesbian books," she later recalled, but instead were organized on the shelves by author's last name (Susan Wisheart, personal communication, May 18, 2010). If she had not known of their existence, she may never have found them. Hidden in plain sight, these works and the messages they contained helped the rural midwesterners who did find them define and redefine what it meant to be gay in American culture.

## NOTES

1. For more on the history of gay and lesbian novels, see Hurley (2007). "Gay and lesbian" will be used throughout this essay instead of GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, queer) because the former phrase is more commonly used to reference the pre-Stonewall era.
2. For additional insight into gay and lesbian identity formation, see Troiden (1988), and Hammack and Cohler (2009).
3. See, for instance, Whitlock (2009); Gottschalk and Newton (2009); McCarthy (2000).
4. For more on the role of periodicals in the construction of gay and lesbian community, see Streitmatter (1995).
5. See, for instance, "Radclyffe Hall Book," 1928, p.13.
6. For further discussion of lesbian pulp fiction, see Forrest (2005).

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