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Book Review: Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity

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Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity. Esther Saxey. 2008. New York: Peter Lang Publishing. 166 pp. \$32.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Amber Guthrie, Katie White and Esther Rothblum¹

Esther Saxey encourages the reader to consider coming out stories of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals as a new genre, one that deserves attention and respect as an important part of the literary world. Her extensive research of over three hundred coming out novels and anthologies sets the stage for a comprehensive examination of the themes and possible issues within this budding genre. As she states in the introduction, “a genre can influence how a single text is shaped, an identity can determine what experience is recollected by an individual, and ultimately, a coming out story can create an identity” (2).

Among lesbian novels she focuses most specifically on Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*, Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and Fiona Cooper’s *Not the Swiss Family Robinson*. Common themes emerged through her examination of these novels, including an emphasis on illegitimacy, the superiority of having a decent family name, as well as the stigma of a queer label itself.

Recognizing the political possibilities behind publishing (often autobiographical) coming out stories, a woman’s life can be seen, as Saxey puts it, as “both individual and universal” (11). She points out the political as well as social power that coming out stories provide for readers and for the authors themselves, such as a sense of community and formation of one’s own identity as lesbian. She also shows some of the disadvantages of such standardized stories—for example, the stifling of individuality and the various ways of experiencing reality. Overall, Saxey demonstrates how the coming out story is a fictional genre influenced by the cultural and political influences in each author’s life thus far. Assuming these stories to be fact can be problematic for both reader and author.

Saxey discovered that lesbian coming out stories seem to focus more on bonding and female identification and appear less linear than coming out stories for gay men. According to her, lesbians often find themselves *and* create themselves. Lesbian authors more often question their own memory and use of language, which Saxey attributes to the influence of feminist politics and consciousness-raising groups. When the lesbian reader interprets lesbian coming out stories, she may mistakenly believe that certain aspects of the story can be skipped, focusing mostly on themes relevant to her own experiences. This is risky in that it shifts from factual reading to interpretive reading. In this way, authors’ ideas can be molded to fit into certain time periods within what Saxey calls the ‘lesbian history myth.’ She touches on three frequent themes in lesbian coming out stories: leaving one’s family, leaving one’s community or home town, and rejecting other-sex desires. However, she points out the ways in which the authors have changed their identity since writing their coming out stories. In this way the coming out story is only one moment in life’s history.

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Among gay male novels, Saxey focuses on *Becoming a Man* by Paul Monette, *Reflections of a Rock Lobster* by Aaron Fricke, *A Matter of Life and Sex* by Oscar Moore, *A Boy's Own Story* by Edmund White, and *Terre Haute* by Will Aitkin. The gay male coming out story is one of profound isolation. Saxey states: "In the early 1970s, a teenage boy is swimming—in a pool, a lake, in the sea. He is a misfit at school, tormented by unrequited passion. He climbs out of the water and goes home alone. By the end of the 20th century, there are many of these boys. So many that at times it seems extraordinary they don't meet: in the locker-room, on the shore, at the beach" (35). The boy is often an adolescent from a middle-class home who can't connect with his siblings, parents, or classmates. Swimming, according to Saxey, contradicts the stereotype of the "effete gay boy without moving into macho contact sports" (41). Swimming also provides opportunity for the boy to observe other scantily dressed boys and a number of gay male coming out stories depict a boy in a swim suit on the book's cover.

The gay male coming out story focuses on the protagonist's childhood, early sexual encounters, relationships with family, and development of sexual identity. Because the boy is so isolated and closeted, he needs to demonstrate all elements of the eventual happy, empowered, adult gay man himself because there are no other characters to support these themes. Thus, in Saxey's words, "... our protagonist is, ultimately, a success: a best-seller, a voice for thousands, a forty-year old teenager who surfaces, survives and claims his identity" (53).

Gay male coming out stories have also had to struggle with the AIDS epidemic. Oscar Moore's *A Matter of Life and Sex* deals with the HIV-positive protagonist whereas books such as Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time: an AIDS Memoir* and Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast: a Memoir* focus on the death of a lover. In this genre the protagonist's coming out story and happy relationship underscores the tragedy of the illness and death. Whereas the typical gay male coming out story depicts an unhappy childhood leading to happiness ever after, the AIDS-related "narrative of decline" has to move in the reverse direction—"showing how times of personal happiness, romantic partnership, and political hope give way to loss, loneliness, and increased homophobia during the epidemic" (69).

What about coming out stories for bisexual women and men? Saxey purposely refers to the lesbian and gay (rather than lesbian/gay/bisexual) coming out story because "...the archetypal story uses the exclusion of any bisexual potential as one of its key dramatic and moral incidents" (10). In other words, the female character who is still attracted to men is not completely evolved. Men who are sexually attracted to both men and women are excluded. She explains how bisexual coming out stories have a heterogeneous understanding of bisexual identity and relationships. Protagonists describe their confusion in fitting in with mainstream society as well as lesbian and gay communities. According to Saxey, "many bisexual coming out stories conclude not with a celebration that cements their identity but with a list of ambitions or plans, a declaration of uncertainty, or a nod to the possibility of future transformation" (135).

Queers of color may feel even more isolated and misunderstood while reading white coming out stories due to the lack of contemplation or inclusion of race and/or class. Saxey describes how lesbians of color struggle to find language for their experiences: "Finding gay or lesbian community is the 'happy ending' of many coming out stories, the end of the protagonist's search. When that community fails queers of color, it robs their story of ecstatic closure" (121).

Through her attempt to see both the pros and cons of coming out stories for the lesbian, gay and bisexual communities, Saxey stakes a claim for their place in contemporary and future literature. As she states, “we grow with the coming out story, and grow from it, but we do not entirely grow out of it” (146).