

Book Resources for Pre-school and Elementary Grades: themes of sexual orientation and gender identity

These titles and more are available from Venus Envy!

For more information or to place an order, email halifax@venusenvy.ca or call 902-422-0004

A Family Is a Family Is a Family

Sara O'Leary - Greenwood Books, 2016

Ages 4 - 7

A classroom of young children are asked to consider what makes families special. The narrator, a student whose head is hanging low, is nervous about answering, because she feels her family is too different from everyone else's. One by one, the students share, in intricate spreads, what makes their families unique. One student says that her mom and dad keep coming home with more children, another declares that both her moms are terrible singers, another mentions that she lives with her grandmother, and "fair's fair" for a child who stays with her mom one week and her father the next. After listening to all the students, the young narrator recalls a time in the park when her foster mother was asked to point out her real children. Her answer: "Oh, I don't have any imaginary children.... All my children are real." In this warm, nondiscriminating narrative, O'Leary removes limiting definitions and labels like "adopted," "fostered," or "divorced" and instead presents a tale that is innocent and wise. Leng's ink and digitally rendered watercolor illustrations are light and airy and complement the text by capturing the thoughts and purity of a child's perspective. The classroom is a beautiful blend of children of different races, genders, and body types. Parents, caregivers, and educators will appreciate the message that this story offers for one-on-one sharing and for discussion with small groups. A sweet and tender tale that shows that families are composed of love regardless of how they may be configured.

- School Library Journal

And Tango Makes Three (board book)

Justin Richardson - Little Simon, 2015

Ages 2 – 5

The heartwarming true story of two penguins who create a nontraditional family is now available in a sturdy board book edition.

At the penguin house at the Central Park Zoo, two penguins named Roy and Silo were a little bit different from the others. But their desire for a family was the same. And with the help of a kindly zookeeper, Roy and Silo got the chance to welcome a baby penguin of their very own.

In time for the tenth anniversary of *And Tango Makes Three*, this Classic Board Book edition is the perfect size for small hands.

And Tango Makes Three (Book and CD)

Justin Richardson - Little Simon, 2015

Ages 4 - 8

Roy and Silo were "a little bit different" from the other male penguins: instead of noticing females, they noticed each other. Thus penguin chick Tango, hatched from a fertilized egg given to the pining, bewildered pair, came to be "the only penguin in the Central Park Zoo with two daddies." As told by Richardson and Parnell (a psychiatrist and playwright), this true story remains firmly within the bounds of the zoo's polar environment, as do Cole's expressive but still realistic watercolors. Emphasizing the penguins' naturally ridiculous physiques while gently acknowledging their situation, Cole's pictures complement the perfectly cadenced text--showing, for example, the bewildered pair craning their necks toward a nest that was "nice, but a little empty." Indeed, intrusions from the zookeeper, who remarks that the nuzzling males "must be in love," strike the narrative's only false note. Further facts about the episode conclude, but it's naive to expect this will be read only as a zoo anecdote. However, those who share this with children will find themselves returning to it again and again--not for the entree it might offer to matters of human sexuality, but for the two irresistible birds at its center and for the celebration of patient, loving fathers who "knew just what to do."

- American Library Association.

Auntie Uncle: Drag Queen Hero

Ellie Royce - Pow! Kids Books, 2020

Ages 3 - 7

Heroes come in all shapes and sizes. Meet Uncle Leo/Auntie Lotta, who, the narrator informs readers, is an office worker by day and a drag performer by night. When Lotta saves an errant puppy at a local Pride parade, the mayor wants to honor her with an award. But who will accept it: Leo or Lotta? Leo/Lotta is written with a rigidly binary personality. Readers learn that Leo is good at math; Lotta loves to sing and dance. The social circles of work and play are kept distinctly separate, although the personas combine into "Auntie Uncle" in the final pages. Leo is depicted as a white man in a brown, tweed sport coat, tie, and trousers while the be-wigged Lotta is drawn in flamboyant outfits that range in color. Although the characters combine at the end, wigless and wearing earrings, a brown coat and trousers, and a diaphanous overskirt, the roles are still separate, although now they are tripartite: "I love my Uncle Leo. He still checks my numbers. I love Auntie Lotta. She still sings and dances with me. But I think maybe I love my Auntie Uncle the best of all."

- Kirkus Reviews

From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea

Kai Cheng Thom - Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017

Ages 3- 7

In the magical time between night and day, when both the sun and the moon are in the sky, a child is born in a little blue house on a hill. And Miu Lan is not just any child, but one who can change into any shape they can imagine. The only problem is they can't decide what to be: A boy or a girl? A bird or a fish? A flower or a shooting star? At school, though, they must endure inquisitive looks and difficult questions from the other children, and they have trouble finding friends who will accept them for who they are. But they find comfort in the loving arms of their mother, who always offers them the same loving refrain: "whatever you dream of / i believe you can be / from the stars in the sky to the fish in the sea."

- Publisher marketing

I Am Jazz

Jazz Jennings - Dial Books, 2014

Ages 5 - 8

In 2001, a documentary was released about transgender Jazz Jennings. Now 13, Jennings tells her story. I have a girl brain but a boy body, she explains, portraying herself from early childhood on preferring the color pink and mermaid costumes to playing with trucks or tools or superheroes, along with a typical array of interests in dancing, soccer, and drawing. The book gives a clear explanation, even for the youngest, of how she knew that she was born different and the importance of family acceptance. Aside from a trio of small photos at the conclusion, this draws on bright watercolor illustrations done with casual realism to underscore Jennings' determined femininity. Both art and narrative accentuate the positive, though not without commenting on the negative. Jennings is mostly surrounded by smiling, supportive friends and family members, but there are teasing peers and confused teachers, though most are persuaded into acceptance. I am happy. I am having fun. I am proud! is a reassuring message for other trans or different children and their families, too.

- American Library Association

Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story about Gender and Friendship

Jessica Walton, - Bloomsbury, 2016

Ages 3 - 6

Errol's teddy bear, Thomas, seems terribly sad--not even playing on the swing in the park helps. Finally, Thomas reveals why: "In my heart, I've always known that I'm a girl teddy, not a boy teddy. I wish my name was Tilly, not Thomas." Errol doesn't respond with confusion, anger, or even a speech about tolerance--he offers cheery, unconditional love ("What matters is that you are my friend"), and life goes on much as it did before--except that Tilly now wears what was once Thomas's bow tie on her head. "Wear whatever makes you happy!" says Errol's equally unfazed friend Ava. Debut author Walton, who has a transgender parent, posits a world that has moved beyond acceptance to essentially "no biggie." Whether being this far ahead of the curve does justice to the transgender experience is debatable, though the book's spirit of easygoing openness makes it a worthwhile resource.

- Publishers Weekly

It Feels Good to Be Yourself: A Book about Gender Identity

Thorn, Theresa Thorn - Henry Holt & Company, 2019

Ages 5 - 8

This elegant picture book is a welcome addition to the world of LGBTQ+ publications for young readers. Thorn explains the concepts of cisgender, transgender, and non-binary in simple, accessible language. Thorn depicts each of these gender identities with realistically diverse examples, including a non-binary child who identifies as both a boy and a girl and a non-binary child who identifies as neither. When Ruthie, a transgender girl, tells her family that she is really a girl, they hug her. The text below the heartwarming illustration says: "Oops! Ruthie was a girl all along--they just didn't know it at first." The well-written story is enhanced by illustrations rendered in watercolor, gouache, and ink. Grigni seizes every opportunity for detail and uses colors that are vibrant and summery with jewel-toned greens, teals, magentas, and purples. A glossary expands on some of the terms explained throughout the book and brings in new ones, such as sex assigned at birth and intersex. The author includes a note about pronouns and resources for kids and adults. With its captivating illustrations and simple language with word repetition, this book would be an exceptional read-aloud for classrooms or storytime, or for an adult reading one-on-one with a child.

- School Library Journal

Jack (Not Jackie)

Erica Silverman - Little Bee Books, 2018

Ages 4 - 8

Susan is thrilled when her baby sister, Jackie, is born, imagining all the fun they will have when Jackie gets bigger. But as Jackie grows, she begins to be, well, different. When the family goes shopping, she runs to the boy's department despite Susan shouting, No, not there, Jackie! But Jackie insists on picking out boy's clothes. Susan is upset, to put it mildly, but Mama wisely says, We wear what feels right. But it's wrong, Susan cries. Not wrong, Mama says gently, Just different. One day at the park, Jackie plays with a little boy who, to Susan's dismay, calls Jackie "Jack". Worse, when Mama cuts the girls' hair, a gender-nonconforming Jackie insists hers be cut short like a boy's. Soon she insists she is now Susan's brother. Gradually, and at first reluctantly, Susan begins to accept Jackie's new persona. Jack is fortunate to have an understanding mother and a sister who loves him. This is one of the only male transgender stories for younger children and important accordingly. Silverman handles her sensitive material extremely well, with a light, nondidactic touch. The spirit of the story is nicely augmented by Hatam's sprightly cartoon illustrations. A helpful appended author's note offers context for the story, which belongs in every library.

- American Library Association

Julián Is a Mermaid

Jessica Love - Candlewick Press, 2018

Ages 4 - 8

On the subway with his abuela after swim class, Julián is enchanted by a group of stylish women in mermaid costumes on their way to a parade. Once home, while his abuela is in the shower, Julián improvises a mermaid costume for himself out of curtains, a potted plant, and a vase of flowers. When Abuela sees the tiny havoc he wreaked in her living room, she doesn't scold him; rather, she embraces his enthusiasm, gives him the finishing touch for his costume, and takes him to the parade. Love's painted scenes glow against muted backgrounds, with saturated, opaque tones tracing the graceful shapes of the figures. They're especially striking when Julián gets swept away in a vivid underwater fantasy: a school of sea creatures whirls around him as he transforms into a mermaid. That scene is nicely replicated when he arrives at the parade, which is populated by scores of people in a wide variety of inventive costumes. The affectionate depiction of a broad range of body types and skin tones makes this particularly cheery.

- American Library Association

Love Makes a Family

Sophie Beer - Dial Books, 2018

Ages 2 - 5

Love is baking a special cake. Love is lending a helping hand. Love is reading one more book. In this exuberant board book, many different families are shown in happy activity, from an early-morning wake-up to a kiss before bed. Whether a child has two moms, two dads, one parent, or one of each, this simple preschool read-aloud demonstrates that what's most important in each family's life is the love the family members share.

Maiden & Princess

Daniel Haack - Little Bee Books, 2019

Ages 4- 8

A multiracial cast stars in this tale of a kingdom in search of a princess for its prince. A warrior maiden who fights alongside and is friends with the prince reluctantly attends the matchmaker ball with encouragement from her mother that she may find her perfect match, "the one," among the guests. She does indeed find the love of her life, not in the prince but in his sister, the princess. The vibrant, colorful costumes, makeup, and hairstyles of the characters as well as the opulent castle ballrooms effectively set a royal stage for the love story. The maiden's omnipresent ruby-red pet dragon adds a bit of fantastical whimsy to the otherwise earnest love story. A positive and affirming picture book, featuring characters of color, a fledgling romance between two girls, and brilliant artwork.

- School Library Journal

My Dad Thinks I'm A Boy?!

Sophie Labelle - Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020

Ages 6 - 9

'My Dad thinks I'm a boy named Stephen who likes wrestling and fishing. But that's what my Dad likes.'

Stephie is 7 years old. She likes bugs, books and spaghetti. Also, she's a girl... which should be pretty easy to understand, right? Well, not for her Dad! He's been mistaking her for a boy since she was born and struggles to see her for who she is.

This powerful and uplifting book for children aged 6 - 9 and their families humorously portrays a situation that is often too common, where a trans child is forced to negotiate between their true self and their parents' love.

With amusing illustrations, and a useful guide for adults, it's the perfect book to help show children that no one else than ourselves gets to decide who we are.

My Princess Boy

Cheryl Kilodavis - Aladdin Paperbacks, 2010

Ages 3 - 7

Kilodavis introduces the difficult themes of bullying and being different, based on the experiences of her four-year-old son. The book tells of a boy who "plays dress up in girly dresses" and is laughed at when he wears them to school but has the support of his family. It is tenderly written and simple enough to be understood by young children. Readers learn about the child's experiences, good and bad. At the end, powerful questions are directed to them for thought and discussion: "If you see a Princess Boy....Will you call him a name? ...Will you like him for who he is?" DeSimone's illustrations are colorful, bright, and positive. Children may ask why the people depicted have no faces, which may spark discussions about how we are all the same. This is a book about unconditional love, social acceptance, and a strong family. It is also a call for diversity, tolerance, and an end to bullying and judgments. It will be well placed in elementary school counseling offices as well as in school and public libraries.

- School Library Journal

Not Quite Narwhal

Jessie Sima - Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2017

Ages 4 - 8

The "not quite" narwhal in this story is Kelp, an adorable unicorn, born underwater and living with an equally adorable school of narwhals. His tusk is kind of short, he's not a very good swimmer, and narwhal food is just gross, but his life is pretty great. Kelp is accepted by the narwhals, and he accepts himself as he is. But one day, a strong current drops him on a beach, where he learns to walk (after hysterically imitating a crab and a frog, he finds that a turtle is the best model) and discovers a whole herd of "land narwhals" who look just like him. Little Kelp's new life is awash in rainbows and unicorns--he almost doesn't want to go home. Of course, home isn't quite the same after his adventure, but luckily everyone is on his side. The narwhals and unicorn meet at the beach, and Kelp ends his story in the best of both worlds. Sima draws digitally on a Wacom drawing tablet and has created charming undersea and overland settings on full-bleed spreads. Her narrative is short, with a storyteller's pacing and winning characters, resulting in an appealing book. Read it for a whimsical storytime or provide some text-to-text connections for older students with Amy Krouse Rosenthal's *Uni the Unicorn* and Bob Shea's *Unicorn Thinks He's Pretty Great*. VERDICT Useful for ELA curricula and sure to circulate, this title is highly recommended. - School Library Journal

Pride Colors

Robin Stevenson - Orca Book Publishers, 2019

Ages 1 - 4

A good thing comes in a small, rainbow package. It's unusual for board books to include backmatter, but this one does, and it provides context for the prior spreads' loving verse and colorful photographs, arranged in the familiar six-color Pride flag sequence. "Everyone is welcome at Pride! The rainbow flag is a colorful symbol of LGBTQ Pride," reads this text, which unfortunately fails to credit Gilbert Baker with creating the flag. It also doesn't acknowledge efforts to include more colors and designs to mark efforts to make the LGBTQ+ movement more inclusive in terms of racial and gender diversity. But, here's what this board book does very, very well: It sends a message of unconditional love to the implied child audience, and it affirms familial and racial diversity. Each color has two spreads. The first introduces the hue with a line of text and is accompanied by a stock photo of a child that somehow highlights that color. The second spread in each pair then shifts to directly address both the depicted child and child readers. For example, "YELLOW SUNSHINE, smiles so bright" introduces yellow with a grinning, light-skinned child wearing a yellow jacket. The next spread reads, "I'll hug you, kiss you, hold you tight," and shows a baby snuggled by people who read as two moms. A joyful, affirming, pride-filled read.

- Kirkus Reviews

Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag

Rob Sanders - Random House Books for Young Readers, 2018

Ages 5 - 8

Written in direct, accessible language, this book opens with a quote from Harvey Milk about hope, the connecting theme of this uplifting introduction to the symbol of the Rainbow Flag. The text starts with Milk's choice to enter politics and Gilbert Baker's design of the first flag and connects that to the flag's modern appearances as a symbol of equality and pride and the use of it on June 26, 2015 across the White House. The illustrations are vibrant and lively, taking inspiration from 1970s fashions and styles while emphasizing the effectiveness of symbols. The narrative includes references to opposition to Milk's dream of equality and the assassination of Milk and George Moscone, but moves decisively on to tell of enduring hope, with an illustration of the candlelight vigil and the persistence of the rainbow flag as an icon. Biographical notes include more information on the flag, Milk, Baker, and the significance of the June 16, 2014 rainbow lights across the White House. The back matter also includes two time lines, a few suggested books and websites, and assorted photographs related to the story. With its emphasis on pride and hope, this title will make a strong addition to classroom and school library collections to support discussions of character and equality.

- School Library Journal

Prince and Knight

Daniel Haack - Little Bee Books, 2018

Ages 4 - 8

Haack and Lewis have created a fairy tale in rhyme about a prince who is looking for a partner. The king and queen help their son meet many young ladies in the kingdom, but he is not interested in any of them. After much deliberation, he decides to leave the kingdom to consider his future. While he is gone, a dragon threatens the royal family and villagers. The prince and knight vanquish the dragon and realize they are perfect for one another. The king and queen are so happy their son has found true love. The digital illustrations are rich in color and depth. This is an illuminating fairy tale for young readers to be able to see that not every prince would like to marry a princess. A great addition to any library or classroom, especially where fairy tales are in demand.

- School Library Journal

Red: A Crayon's Story

Michael Hall - Greenwillow Books, 2015

Ages 4 - 8

Red is a crayon, and children will see his problem right away: his label reads "red," but he's blue. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he's a poor performer in school, where his drawings are expected to be red. Hall (It's an Orange Aardvark!) has a fine ear for dialogue, and the overly cheerful encouragement Red endures will sound familiar to any child who's struggled to perform: "I'll draw a red strawberry, then you draw a red strawberry," coaches the scarlet crayon. "You can do this. Really!" But a page turn reveals two rows of strawberries, one scarlet and the other... blue. A Greek chorus of grown-up crayons lined up across a black spread makes patronizing comments: "He's got to press harder." "Really apply himself!" Only when Red is at his wit's end does he meet Berry, a crayon who actually sees him. "Will you make a blue ocean for my boat?" Berry asks quietly, and that's all it

takes to change Red's life. Stories about accepting differences abound, but this one delivers its message in an unexpectedly affecting way.

- Publishers Weekly

Stella Brings the Family

Miriam Schiffer - Chronicle Books, 2015

Ages 4 - 8

At school, everyone is excited about the upcoming Mother's Day celebration except for Stella. She is not sure what she will do since she has two dads and no mom. Stella is easy to spot on the page with her curly red hair but also because she looks so worried. She is not sure what she is going to do for the party. When her classmates ask her what is the matter and she tells them she has no mom to bring, they begin asking more questions. "Who packs your lunch like my mom does for me?" "Who reads you bedtime stories like my mothers do for me?" "Who kisses you when you are hurt?" Stella has Daddy and Papa and other relatives who do all of those things. As the students decorate and craft invitations, "Stella worked harder than everyone." The day of the event arrives, and Stella shows up with her fathers, uncle, aunt, cousin, and Nonna. And it all turns out well. One student brings his two moms, and another child invites his grandmother since his mother is away. Debut picture-book author Schiffer creates a story featuring diverse modern families that children will recognize from their own direct experiences or from their classrooms or communities. She keeps the text closely focused on Stella's feelings, and Clifton-Brown chooses finely detailed watercolors to illustrate Stella's initial troubles and eventual happiness.

- Kirkus Reviews

Stonewall: A Building. an Uprising. a Revolution

Rob Sanders - Random House Books for Young Readers, 2019

Ages 6 - 9

What's this? A picture book about the Stonewall Riots and the beginning of the LGBTQ rights movement? Yes, indeed, and an excellent one at that. The story begins in the 1840s, with two stable houses that would be put together to become, in time, the Stonewall Inn, the gay bar where, more than a century later, history would be made. The book's clever conceit is that it is told by the building itself, providing its witness to history and the changing nature of the increasingly Bohemian Greenwich Village, which establishes the geographic context for the unfolding story leading up to the evening of June 28, 1969. Sanders does a superb job of creating an age-appropriate, truth-telling, and generally comprehensive text, which successfully brings history up to the present day. As for the illustrations, Christoph's many double-page spreads are exceedingly handsome, enriching and expanding the text. Welcome back matter includes the above-mentioned history, which notes the contributions of transgender women of color, as well as black-and-white photographs and a brief interview with LGBTQ activist and Stonewall participant Martin Boyce.

- American Library Association.

The Boy & the Bindi

Shraya, Vivek Shraya - Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016

Ages 4 - 8

An unnamed South Asian boy becomes fascinated with the decoration on his mother's brow, and when she explains what it means to her, he asks for one of his own. The bindi makes him feel safe, calm, sure. His white friends at the playground wonder what it is, and he has trouble explaining, but he decides he'll never be without it. He feels small and ugly sometimes, but the bindi brings beauty where there was none. Shraya uses rhyme, sometimes a bit awkwardly, to tell her tale. At the end, her protagonist imagines readers asking, "Why is it so special anyway?" More sure of himself now, the boy explains that it's like a third eye watching over him, reminding him not to hide himself away and to embrace his potential self. The bright, beautiful illustrations by Perera do the heavy lifting, symbolically infusing the boy's cultural difference with the spiritual power it carries for the wearer. The book does not say that bindis are mainly worn by Hindu women in relation to their marital status, allowing readers familiar with the culture to imagine what it means for the boy's mother. Her decision to give one to her son opens up discussions of gender within cultural norms, including the fact that some Hindu men wear bindis for spiritual reasons unrelated to marital status. The mostly easy rhyming and vivid colors make this an unforgettable look into Hindu culture.

- Kirkus Reviews

When Aidan Became a Brother

Kyle Lukoff - Lee & Low Books, 2020

Ages 3- 7

A transgender boy anticipates his new job as a big brother by helping his parents prepare for his baby sibling's arrival. Aidan "felt trapped" in his old name, clothes, and room before he told his parents "what he knew about himself." Some girls never wore dresses, "but Aidan didn't feel like any kind of girl" because he was "another kind of boy." With his parents' support, he embraces his identity and takes on a new, important role, becoming a big brother. More than anything, he wants the baby to feel loved and understood. This picture book sets a new standard of excellence in transgender representation by centering the feelings of Aidan, a biracial (black and South Asian) transgender boy. Bright, mixed patterns in Aidan's clothes capture the vibrancy of his personality and his excitement to welcome a baby into the family. Lukoff (*A Storytelling of Ravens*, 2018) breaks away from binary language and stereotypical gender roles, highlighting within the text and in an author's note that there is more than one way to be a person of any gender. The hopeful message at the end emphasizes love and the importance of staying open to learning. Joyful and affirming, Aidan's story is the first of its kind among books for welcoming a new baby.

Kirkus Reviews

- Kirkus Reviews

Worm Loves Worm

JJ Austrian - Balzer & Bray, 2016

Ages 4 - 8

In addition to sharing a first name, Worm and Worm love each other and decide to get married. Their friends have several ideas about what the wedding needs: someone to perform the service, a best beetle, bride's bees, rings, a band, cake, and outfits. When the best beetle and bride's bees start fretting about who is the bride and who is the groom, both worms declare that they are willing to be the bride and the groom. Cricket the officiant declares that's not how it's done, but Worm and Worm decide to change tradition and are happily married. The story is nicely paced and can be a great way to introduce children to what might happen at a wedding. Most important, though, are the subtle yet effective messages of what's important when two individuals decide to wed. With its cute critters, sweet story, and messages of equality, this is a first purchase that celebrates the fact that love always wins.

- School Library Journal

These titles and more are available from Venus Envy!

We offer school and educator discounts, 30-day terms.

For more information or to place an order, email halifax@venusenvy.ca or call 902-422-0004