

## A Bad Case of Intolerance

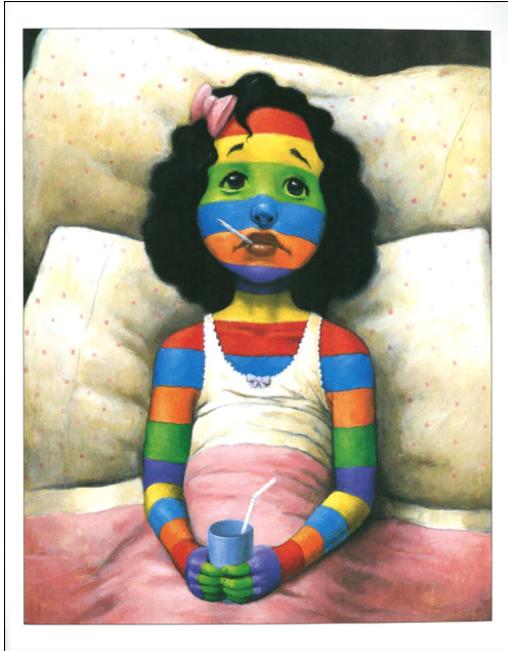
Children's books are notoriously lighthearted and morally straightforward with the purpose of delivering the perfectly digestible, kid-sized sandwich of comfort, warmth, and morality. Unfortunately, not all lessons have the luxury of being as "in your face" as sharing and honesty. Queer acceptance in all forms has long been embedded into literature for all ages, even when it was dangerous to do so. The only difference between books that teach you not to lie to your parents and books that teach you to love yourself is that the former has no need to disguise itself. Necessity feeds invention, so it is only natural that books with queer themes would need to be more creative than a story told by someone with nothing to lose. *A Bad Case of Stripes* (1998) by author and illustrator David Shannon had everything to lose – and that is exactly why it is not only an invaluable reflection of 1990's American culture, but also a brilliant continuation of a long history of concealed queer nonconformity in literature. The tale of a young girl and her case of stripes was never intended to be taken at face value, except by the adults and authorities who had the power to censor it. The story opens on Camilla Cream standing in front of her mirror, rummaging through forty-two different outfits for her first day of school in search of the one that would make her fit in, the one that other kids would like her best in. This is when she notices her first onset of symptoms – she has broken out in colorful stripes! When considered through the context of what was going on legislatively in the '90s with respect to "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the Defense of Marriage Act, this suddenly becomes a much more politically charged ailment. Rainbow stripes have been associated with the LGBTQ+ community for decades, so the idea that the themes of this story, the colors, and her cure could just be a coincidence is a bit hard to swallow. Shannon took the opportunity to challenge *how* his impressionable audience reads,

not just *what* they read, because this kind of critical thinking is something that will never diminish in value, no matter the societal climate.

Along with the '90s wave of iconic television shows and thriving Tamagotchi characters came a surge of hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community. Legislatively, 1993 signaled the introduction of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" United States military policy which, "... permitted gays to serve in the military but banned homosexual activity" (Howard University Law Library). The state of Colorado moved to pass Amendment 2 which would serve to strip away any legal protection lesbians and gays had against discrimination, but was thankfully denied in *Romer v. Evans*. Soon after, The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was passed in 1996 which federally defined marriage as the union of a man and a woman, effectively granting permission for states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages. Essentially:

While DOMA did not bar individual states from recognizing same-sex marriage, it imposed constraints on the benefits that all legally married same-sex couples could receive. These included insurance benefits for government employees, social security survivors' benefits, immigration assistance, ability to file for joint bankruptcy, and the filing of joint tax returns. DOMA also made same-sex married couples ineligible for financial aid that was otherwise available to heterosexual married couples. (Howard University Law Library 1)

So sure, depending on your state, you might be allowed to marry your partner, but the government made sure that mundane life would be difficult.



David Shannon was not the first, and will certainly not be the last children's author to write with queer subtexts and symbolism, but every book approaches the topic with varying degrees of blatancy. In "Reading Queer Subtexts in Children's Literature," literary scholar Jessica Kander examines the generalized adult imposition that children exist innocently without sexuality. In an attempt to separate the possibility of adult experiences in children's lives, we have both dehumanized *and* sexualized them. It is the human condition to assign identities to others and package them in neat, comprehensible boxes, but in the assumption that all children are void of homoerotic desires, we have effectively defaulted them to heterosexuality, and othered those who fail to fit in that category (Kander 5). The late '90s saw upticks in public outrage over queer stories like *Heather Has Two Mommies*, making Shannon's *A Bad Case of Stripes* all the more risky and deliberate with its symbolism. When Camilla tried to go back to school, the principal called her mom to insist, "I'm going to have to ask you to keep Camilla

home from school. She's just too much of a distraction, and I've been getting calls from the other parents. They're afraid the stripes may be contagious'" (Shannon 5). A girl trying to change herself to please her classmates? Breaking out into rainbows when she cannot bring herself to do so? Peers being disgusted by her bright colors, everyone from a psychiatrist to a veterinarian being called in to "cure" her? Being kicked out of school because adults fear that you might "infect" other children? The ultimate cure being her embracing her love of lima beans (lima beans... lima beans... les-beans... lesbians...)? This may seem obvious now, but it was quite intentional in peeking out from behind more mainstream, unsuspecting themes like embracing what makes you different because it also makes you happy.

A quick search of reviews for this story will reveal the general consensus that this book was terrifying for a variety of reasons (the illustrations, implications of becoming infected with an alienating mystery illness, etc.), but some commentaries are more productive than others. For example, one reader states, "Not a good choice for highly imaginative kids, easy to be frightened by the imagery and what it implies to that type of child" (Goodreads 1). Others chose a more intolerant route, implying the presence of a queer kid in literature is disruptive:

This story sound(s) like the author is pushing a gay narrative. First the little girl is in the "closet" she can('t find what to wear...and when she come(s) out all of a sudden she is striped and they say "rainbow colors" in the story. (T)hey talk about how others make (f)un of her because of what she likes to "eat," another form of sexual preference. Anyways at the end she says she learns not to care what others think of her(,) she will "ea(t)" what she likes to eat all the time no matter what others think or say. I'm sorry but these stories should not be read by children. This

is wrong. I'm almost positive this was the author's real intention. And making books for children like this is wrong.

Perspectives like these beg the question – if simply including queer children in stories is considered “pushing a gay narrative,” then could the same not be said for every heterosexual depiction of characters in other stories? Why is one more “wrong” than the other? The answer (at least to this reviewer) is that it does not conform to the heterocentric agenda, and therefore is inherently inappropriate. Othering identities that are not your own from a young age is the root of lifetime discrimination, and adults continue to perpetuate this villainization through book bans in school libraries and micromanaged curriculum in classes.



However, the question of why a children’s book would be so graphic remains, with a very simple answer – it is meant to stick with you. The more time you spend thinking about this story and its illustrations, the more you get out of it. The vivid imagery (as pictured on the side) is inarguably shocking, but that is why it is effective. There is much to be said about why so many

first reactions to this story are fear, but for the sake of this essay, we can understand that Shannon's purpose was not as cut-and-dried as it would seem. To an adult, it would be easy to assume this book is just a (mildly scary) surface level reminder to be true to yourself, but these illustrations were designed to linger in your mind. Too often, fear stunts deeper thinking in grown-ups with the ability to block it out, but adolescents are naturally creative thinkers. Shannon set out to foster this skill in children, because when your individuality is threatened, so are you. Teaching kids to take the message that relates to them most from a story is the most important part of this book, the one that teaches critical, creative, and independent thinking from such an early age.

Now, arguably more than ever, it is crucial to encourage children to read more critically and deeply, and find their own ways to understand ideas. Texas is a concerning example of a state where critical thinking is seriously endangered. Rampant book banning (nearly 1,600 to date), anti-trans and queer legislature, and legally pardoned discrimination are strides towards squashing diversity. In "Explaining the Latest Texas Anti-Transgender Directive," journalist Alene Bouranova states, "It's only the newest anti-transgender measure from Texas, which saw a record number of anti-trans bills introduced to the state's House and Senate last year" (Bouranova 2). It seems apparent that lawmakers and those in positions of authority are being governed by either ignorance or intolerance. With so many queer books being banned, the skill of reading in between the lines will become an invaluable tool to keep our youth educated, empowered, and safe. Without the ability to think, we lack the power to act and ultimately *change* the direction society is heading.

Queer kids who are desperately searching for themselves in literature will quickly realize that without the ability to read between the lines, they might have no stories at all. No matter the

oppressive laws or ideas put into place by certain people, individuality will persist – whether it be rainbow flag-doused parades or more nuanced representations in stories. *A Bad Case of Stripes* is the perfect example of the adage, “take what resonates and leave the rest,” because the rest will always find a way of reaching the ones who need it. If children learn to find what they need in the stories around them, then authors and minds like Shannon’s will have done their jobs.

## Works Cited

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