

## INTERSECTIONAL LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES

Stephanie Anne Shelton, Column Editor

*A preservice teacher shares a lesson plan that centers queer identities and student autonomy.*

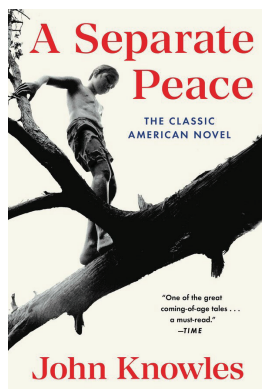
### The Importance of Queer Joy in the Classroom

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“Well, I mean, it’s obvious he’s in love with him, right?” I lowered my hand in my ninth-grade English class to the sound of snickers and “ew.” I thought that everyone else in the class had drawn the same conclusion—that Gene and Finny’s relationship in *A Separate Peace* (Knowles) was clearly more than friendship. Surrounded by peers’ groans and laughter following my question, I didn’t want anyone to look at me, let alone suspect that *I* was gay. As one of my



English teacher’s favorite students, I looked to her to have my back.

“No, absolutely not,” she responded, her lip curled in distaste. “There are no homoerotic undertones in this book. These two boys are just friends.”

Horrified, I stuck my face back into my heavily annotated paperback copy. I felt horribly silly for misreading the entire book, and it made me question *why* I had even interpreted the characters’ relationship as queer in the first place. Looking back, I realize that I spent most of high school taking “Am I Gay?” self-quizzes, consuming queer cult classics, and being an intense and invested ally.

Turns out, I’m just gay, but it took me twenty-one years to figure that out.

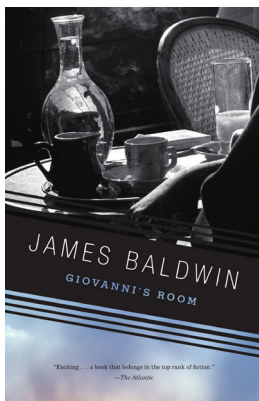
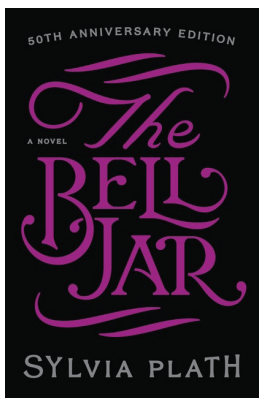
Currently, in my undergraduate senior year, I am studying to become a high school English language arts (ELA) teacher. These memories from my high school years and my celebration of my own queer identity inextricably intertwine to inform who I am as an education student, and who I want to be as an ELA teacher. The heartbreak I felt in the described high school moment, including

mourning Finny’s death, led me to learn about what are referred to as *queer-coded deaths* and how often they appear in English classrooms when we study literature (Hulan). This knowledge prompted me, as part of my teacher education program, to create a literary unit that I share here, one that disrupts this tradition of queer death and instead centers queer joy.

### BURY YOUR GAYS

*Queer-coding* is when a character can be interpreted as LGBTQ+ based on textual evidence, but the author never confirms that the character is queer. The phrase *bury your gays* is a key aspect of queer-coding and references the long literary tradition of killing off these queer-coded characters, which some scholars argue is done to punish their queerness. A range of regularly assigned ELA texts feature queer-coded characters’ deaths, such as those of Finny in *A Separate Peace* (Knowles), Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare), Joan in *The Bell Jar* (Plath), and the protagonist’s friend in *Giovanni’s Room* (Baldwin).

Haley Hulan attributes the origins of queer-coded deaths to



“The Criminal Amendment Act of 1885 [which] outlawed ‘committing acts of gross indecency with male persons’” by people of the same gender (18). The decency codes condemned queerness as a disorder, encouraging authors who included queer characters to frame them negatively, and often to kill them. These queer deaths shape ELA teacher-led curricula and student engagement with LGBTQ+ representations in literature, but there are ways to emphasize queer joy rather than queer-coded tragedy.

### QUEER JOY 101

There are positive, classroom-appropriate queer texts readily available that can center positive LGBTQ+ representations and a range of ELA classroom skills that students need and can interest

them. As part of my teacher preparation program, I designed a unit to center queer joy as well as the intersection of LGBTQ+ topics with literature, historical context, and student creativity. A key text in this unit, which emphasizes historical nonfiction, is *Queer: A Graphic History* (Barker and Scheele). For students and teachers who know little about LGBTQ+

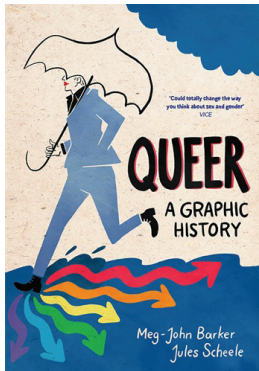
topics, this nonfiction book offers accessible explanations of terms associated with queer identities, while detailing histories of LGBTQ+ people and events.

Also, *Queer: A Graphic History* allows students to refer to a queer time line that easily complements potential supplemental texts to support their interests (see Table 1). The book connects well

TABLE 1  
Suggested Reading for Teachers

Texts for Teachers to Learn More (and Potentially Use in Class)	Texts for Centering Queer Identities and Joy
<i>Stonewall: Breaking Out in the Fight for Gay Rights</i> by Ann Bausum	<i>Queer: A Graphic History</i> by Meg-John Barker and Jules Scheele
<i>Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out</i> by Susan Kuklin	<i>Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States</i> by Samantha Allen
<i>Queer, There, and Everywhere: Twenty-Three People Who Changed the World</i> by Sarah Prager	<i>The Gender Quest Workbook: A Guide for Teens and Young Adults Exploring Gender Identity</i> by Rylan Jay Testa, Deborah Coolhart, and Jayme Peta
<i>Gender Trouble</i> by Judith Butler	<i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i> by Benjamin Alire Sáenz
<i>The Educator’s Guide to LGBTQ+ Inclusion</i> by Kryss Shane	<i>Leah on the Offbeat</i> by Gabby Rivera
<i>Would You Rather: A Memoir of Growing Up and Coming Out</i> by Katie Heaney	<i>As I Descended</i> by Robin Talley
<i>Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ+ Inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom</i> by Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth	<i>The Taqwacores</i> by Michael Muhammad Knight
<i>Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology</i> , edited by Amy Sonnie	<i>Mooncakes</i> by Suzanne Walker

These texts can support teachers’ efforts to learn about and incorporate positive LGBTQ+ representations.



not only with other class readings, but to current events and students' own lives as well.

An integral part of the unit emphasis on joy is student voice. Therefore, I designed a culminating project that invites students to create their own condensed version of this book. Students select either a single event from LGBTQ+ history that they want to learn more about, or a related event from their own lives. In addition to developing research skills, this assignment offers students and teachers options for writing genres.

For example, based on my student teaching experiences, I envision the project inviting students to engage in informational and/or narrative writing on the student-selected event, and if student- and course-appropriate, offering multimodal options that might include students' own graphic-based writing, historically based podcast, or short film. The assignment asks students to contextualize the books and articles they've read in class (such as those in Table 1), while adding their own perspectives and creative expressions. The purpose of the project is to further expand on the ideas of the foundational

text while empowering students to develop their individual interests, identities, and perspectives.

Because I recognize that not all educators are able to assign LGBTQ+ literature, the unit includes additional strategies that could foster queer joy for LGBTQ+ students without using the suggested texts. We can invite all students to select choice books or, when possible, allow them to individually modify the class syllabus or required assignments. Such approaches can permit queer students to access and engage with LGBTQ+-positive readings independently, while accessing teacher support. If teachers and students are unsure of ways to foster these opportunities, one successful suggestion (based on my experiences and unit planning) is for students to keep a journal notebook to reflect on their identities in relation to current events and class texts, which offers a safe outlet for queer students—and all students—to examine themselves in relation to broader contexts. To whatever degrees educators feel able to adopt and adapt this unit, the point is to shift from the many literary pages of queer deaths to a new focus that supports students through self-exploration, creativity, and joy.

## BACK TO SCHOOL

While writing this essay during the fall 2021 semester, I learned that the administrators at my former high school, St. Paul Catholic in Bristol, Connecticut, had decided to add a paragraph on gender identity to the student handbook.

Essentially, it states that students will only be recognized by their assigned gender at birth. The language strongly reinforces cis-genderism and, at points, homophobia. Of course, this is horribly upsetting to me as a queer alumnus. I imagine another ninth grader raising their hand and, like me, being cast down for their queer interpretations and fearful of others suspecting their queer identity.

While I am ashamed of the administrators and staff at my high school, their ideas only emphasize the need for positive queer representations in the lives of all our students. Some students will always question their sexuality and gender and need support, regardless of what a handbook says, regardless of a teacher's dismissal of queer characters, and regardless of queer-coded deaths. School teachers and administrators who support queer students and the teachers who work to incorporate queer joy can only create better and safer spaces that empower students to celebrate themselves and LGBTQ+ diversity. [EJ](#)

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## Sonnet for My Pandemic Class

Today I have my classroom diced and stacked,  
 the students in tiny squares I can see  
 even with their cameras off, squares of black  
 where I pour Hamlet and they learn from me,  
 or not. Their questions never touch the text;  
 they interrogate each other, from box  
 to box. If muted, fingers fly to text.  
 I am lost, a sloth, and them, each a fox  
 too fleet; archaic lesson cannot reach  
 to hidden den, to solitary heart  
 or head sequestered there, my filtered speech  
 settles, unwanted pollen in each cart.  
 This brave new world where education zooms  
 and students' distant muted silence booms.

—CECIL MORRIS

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Recently retired from teaching high school English in California, **CECIL MORRIS** uses his spare time to write and read poetry. He also eats too much ice cream and too few cruciferous vegetables for his own good. Cecil can be reached at [cwmorris@surewest.net](mailto:cwmorris@surewest.net).

## Time-Lapse Video of an Adult ESL Student

*after Joshua Jennifer Espinoza*

I teach adult ESL in the building that used to be  
 the White Store, where my Russian immigrant grandmother  
 used to buy apparel, furnishings, sporting goods, and groceries.  
 My immigrant and refugee students  
 are well-versed in the *police sirens and coyote howls*  
 of Espinoza's poem, "Time-Lapse Video of Trans Woman Collapsing  
 Inward Like a Dying Star"—they, too, my students,  
*Imagine a place after this place,*  
 this White Store,  
 where one type of immigrant was once acceptable  
 and allowed and now another is not.  
 My immigrant and refugee students  
 have degrees and careers and apparel and furnishings  
 and an *invisible fire* in their home countries,  
 and here they are resigned  
 to Walmart, landscaping jobs, and  
*the sound of a promise breaking.*

—MARIA FISCHER

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**MARIA FISCHER** teaches English at Joliet Catholic Academy, adult English as a Second Language (ESL) at Joliet Junior College, and education at Lewis University. Her book of poems "*There Is No One Better," the Seamstress Says* was published by Bellows Ark Press. Maria can be reached at [mfischer@jjc.edu](mailto:mfischer@jjc.edu).