

**PROUD**

LITTLE TIGER

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Compiled by Juno Dawson

Written by:

Caroline Bird  
Simon James Green  
Kay Staples  
Cynthia So  
Freja Nicole Woolf  
David Levithan  
Tanya Byrne  
Michael Lee Richardson  
Karen Lawler  
Fox Benwell  
Jess Vallance  
Moira Fowley  
Dean Atta

Art by:

Saffa Khan  
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Kameron White  
K Valentin  
Kip Alizadeh  
Kathi Burke  
Leo Greenfield

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LONDON

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## **A NOTE ON THE STORIES**

The stories in this anthology deal with the struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ community. On page 383, we have included a list of resources to help you if you are affected by any of the issues raised in this book or would like to find out more.

## FOREWORD

When I was a little girl, I didn't know I was a little girl.

Or rather, as soon as I knew there was any sort of a difference between boys and girls I knew, without hesitation, that I would definitely prefer to be a girl. What I wasn't aware of was that parents who are told they got a baby boy, might actually have a baby girl. I didn't know that a whole bunch of these babies grow up and decide to do something about the gender they were assigned at birth. I certainly didn't know the term 'transgender'.

My ignorance existed for several reasons. The first, I guess, was the education of my parents. They, like the vast majority of parents at the time, had never heard of transgender people. Although I continually asked my parents when I was going to metamorphose into a girl, they didn't know that was a 'thing' any more than I did. Can't, and have never, blamed them.

The second reason is worse because it was so cruel. I was born during the political reign of a woman called Margaret Thatcher. Here we need some historical context. Against the backdrop of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which was inaccurately attributed to gay and bisexual men, public

attitudes towards LGBTQ people was at an all time low in Britain, with the British Social Attitudes Survey reporting that 75% of the population felt homosexual was ‘always or mostly wrong’.

In the middle of this negativity came a children’s book. It was called *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*. You guessed it, it’s about a little girl who has two dads. When the *Daily Mail* newspaper got wind that this book was being stocked in a school library, they splashed it across the front pages, causing a moral panic which eventually led Thatcher’s Conservative government to introduce a piece of legislation called Section 28.

This clause in the Local Government Act 1988 stated that local authorities (thus including schools and libraries): ‘shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality’ or ‘promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’. Wow. Yeah, that was a thing that happened.

The ‘acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’? Ruddy hell.

This of course meant that teachers and librarians were terrified that if they helped or supported young LGBTQ



people in any way, they would be persecuted. A culture of clanging silence fell over schools, libraries and youth clubs. For twelve long years, teenagers went to school, unable to ask their teachers, counsellors, mentors and librarians questions on burgeoning feelings about themselves, their bodies, their minds, their desires.

I was one of those teenagers. Being a gender non-conforming queer youth was WELL FUN in the 90s let me tell you. I remember one time, an entire football team had scooped up handfuls of wet mud off the pitch and hurled them at me, shouting 'DOLLY DAWSON'. My poor PE teacher, himself a gay man, could only stand at arm's length and ask 'who did this?'

'All of them,' I replied, in tears. And he couldn't do a thing to help. There were no measures in place for homophobic, transphobic or biphobic bullying. How could there be? That might be seen to 'promote' homosexuality.

The government of the era made my life worse. I am still covered in scars – real and metaphorical – because of that piece of legislation. It was eventually scrapped by the Labour government in 2000.

Sorry, did that come across political? Welcome to being LGBTQ+. Your life is inherently political. Politicians, all

the world over, are *still* discussing whether or not you should have the same fundamental human rights as straight or cisgender people.

The final reason I didn't start my transition until I was twenty-eight was the media. Ooh the media is a powerful, powerful thing. I have mixed feelings about being a very small cog in that thundering, polluting social engine. As discussed, banning a book was instrumental in the introduction of Section 28. The *Mail* announced in 1985: 'Britain Threatened by Gay Virus Plague'. The *Sun* said 'Blood From Gay Donor Puts 41 At Risk'. Fast forward to 2017 and *The Times* declared 'Children Sacrificed to Trans Lobby'. The *Mail*: 'The NHS Pressured Our Kids to Change Sex'.

Almost thirty years, but the same moral panic. Gay people, trans people, bi people, queer people: the media wants people to think we are a risk. A risk to your health, a risk to your children. Utter, unrepentant, unreserved bigotry and prejudice.

But with Section 28 gone, media attitudes towards (cisgender) gay and lesbian people improved over the course of the late nineties. *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk* appeared on Channel 4; Ellen DeGeneres came out;

Graham Norton got his own chatshow; Dana International won Eurovision; *Doctor Who* had a bi companion (Jack Harkness) and then a lesbian one (Bill Potts); *Big Brother* heralded the dawn of Reality TV and with it household names Brian Dowling, Anna Nolan, Rylan Clark, Will Young, Nadia Almada. Which came first? Media representation or the shift in attitudes? Chicken or egg?

YA fiction has always pushed boundaries. In Judy Blume's *Forever* (1974), 'theatrical' Artie tries to kill himself after questioning his sexuality. Almost thirty years later in David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), Paul and Noah attend a high school so inclusive, their sexuality is the least of their worries. Levithan dared to dream of a world free of intolerance and hatred. Sadly, we're still dreaming.

Our books are widely 'challenged' or banned. My own *This Book Is Gay* (2014) was removed from Alaskan libraries in 2015 after parental complaints. Luckily, the librarian fought back and the book is still in the Walsilla Library, albeit in a different section.

We fight on. We, as LGBTQ authors, know how important it is to see ourselves in stories. If we live in stories, it means we live in the real world too. We are

claiming our space, claiming our oxygen. Since the dawn of time, we have been told in a litany of ways that we are 'less-than', 'out of the ordinary', 'abnormal', 'subnormal', or plain 'different'. We are fucking none of those things. We are gloriously ourselves, and we show the world our glory during Pride.

That is why Pride is both party and protest. It's noisy, it's colourful, its glittery and it's very, very visible. It's a statement to the whole wide world that we are here; we celebrate our varied and diverse culture; our history; our struggles.

Bringing me to this very book. All the wonderful writers and illustrators featured are LGBTQ+. We've all got here *despite* the barriers and struggles we've experienced. Oh, and I'm sure we have. I bet every last one of us has, at some point, felt like a misfit, an outsider, a prisoner in our own body. And yet here we are, spinning that straw into gold! We are *proud* of ourselves because I know that I often felt like I wouldn't succeed because of my gender or sexuality, but I did.

I am SHOOK at the talent I persuaded to write for us. Pretty much everyone I asked said yes within about ten minutes. What a fucking day that was! I am a fangirl

for every last established writer and illustrator in this collection, and I can't tell you what a rush it was to help choose the four previously unpublished authors we've unearthed. They're all going to be stars.

The only shame was that I couldn't call upon ALL the LGBTQ YA talent I love so much. When you've finished this anthology and bought all our books (if you love LGBTQ authors, *buy* LGBTQ authors) also check out YA superstars Patrick Ness, Cat Clarke, Liz Kessler, Susie Day, Andrew MacMillan, Steven Lenton, Alex T Smith, Alex Bertie, Adam Silvera, Nina LaCour, Will Walton, Josh Martin, Robin Talley, Alex Gino and Marieke Nijkamp... and those are just the ones I can recall without googling. VERY sorry if I forgot you.

See all those names? We're not successful because we're gay, or trans, or bi, or queer. We're successful because we're good. We are all skilled and talented. The best thing we can do to influence change is what we do best. We tell stories: stories about ourselves and stories about people like us. These stories are that (potentially fictional) brick that was first thrown at the Stonewall riots, the inception of Pride marches. We are hurling our messages of love, of kindness, of hope, out into the world. Enjoy! And *share*

them. That's what *you* can do. Tell everyone you know about this book.

Unbelievably, it's now five years since PROUD came out. It's so lovely that school libraries in particular are buying this book and displaying it *proudly* in schools. Such a thing would have been impossible in my day. I would love to say that things had gotten better since the book was first released in 2018, but I don't think they have. If anything, they've gotten worse.

In both the UK and the US, politicians are using LGBTQ people to distract from their failings. Sadly, this tactic seems to be working. Books in particular are the target of far-right groups who claim that books like this one are 'grooming' young adults and, in essence TURNING YOU QUEER.

Clearly, this is gibberish. If books had that power, I would identify as a Very Hungry Caterpillar. Every book I was taught in school, from *Romeo and Juliet* to *An Inspector Calls* featured straight and cis characters and lo, I sit before you a transsexual. When people 'challenge' or 'ban' LGBTQ books it's because they think there's something fundamentally wrong with being queer. If they truly were 'thinking of the children', they would be rather

more invested in supporting education around inclusion to stop young LGBTQ people facing prejudice in schools and society at large.

You deserve to see yourselves in fiction and poetry as much as anyone else does.

Whether you picked up this book because you identify as LGBTQ+, or because you're having a think about your identity, or because you're one of the millions of friendly allies we absolutely rely on to coexist in a very heteronormative, cisgender society, I thank you for the bottom of my heart. I really hope you enjoy these stories, poems and pictures.

I'm proud of *you*.

Juno Dawson

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