

Final Paper/Nash

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*Using Lois-Ann Yamanaka's Name Me Nobody to enhance language arts pedagogy focusing on issues related to homosexuality and sexual orientation.*

Because many young adults develop anti-gay feelings at a young age, and because problems related to homophobia seem to be growing in today's secondary public schools, more language arts teachers need to embrace critical teaching strategies that advance awareness and tolerance of the homosexual lifestyle. At the secondary level, teachers must look for ways to challenge anti-gay behavior and abusive gay language; they must look for ways to teach young adults non-judgmental facts about homosexuality, and about differences between oppressive and non-oppressive behavior. To do this properly requires spending time exploring resources and creating teaching strategies that incorporate grade-level, age-appropriate coverage of critical social issues related to homosexuality, particularly homophobic harassment, stereotyping, name-calling, and other kinds of bullying and abuse. One successful approach calls for using novels written specifically for teenagers that address sensitive multicultural issues such as homosexuality. Louis-Ann Yamanaka's *Name Me Nobody*, for instance, is a thought-provoking young adult novel that handles the topic of sexual orientation with dexterity. For language arts teachers interested in anti-bigotry pedagogy, a critical examination of the emotionality surrounding homosexuality in

Yamanaka's novel not only can draw student's attention to harmful anti-homosexual behaviors, biases, and attitudes, but can also lay the groundwork for additional classroom discussions on possibilities for curbing homophobic harassment and discriminatory behavior.

Briefly, *Name Me Nobody's* plot revolves around the story's protagonist Emi-Lou Kaya, a 13-year-old girl growing up in a small Hawaiian town. From all appearances, Emi's social and personal lives appear demanding. For instance, kids at Emi's school make fun of her weight and call her names like "Emi-lump," "Emi-oink," and "Emi-fat" (7). When it comes to popularity at school, Emi says she is "not smart enough to be a nerd," not stinky enough "to be a turd," and that she falls "somewhere right below the band geeks and right above the zeroes" (7). At home, readers learn that Emi's grandmother, Leatrice, is raising Emi (Emi's mother "ditched" (5) her at the age of three, and Emi does not know who her father is). Apparently, the only people Emi can count on for personal and social support is her grandmother, and her best friend, Yvonne.

Emi's sometimes-turbulent relationship with Yvonne propels the novel's story line. Readers learn that problems crop up when rumors of a lesbian relationship between Yvonne and an older female softball player named Babes surface in school and in town. To Emi (who is not a lesbian), Yvonne's attention to Babes threatens their camaraderie. Yvonne, however, does not agree. Regardless, envy and anger encroach on Yvonne and Emi's friendship, and for most of the story Emi frantically attempts to recapture Yvonne's companionship, strength, and support. Overall, the story is engaging and makes readers stay with the tale long enough to see if Emi and Yvonne stay angry at each other, or if they salvage the friendship.

For the purposes of a teaching unit focusing on anti-homosexual attitudes and ways to decrease prejudice, teachers should have students pay particular attention to how Yamanaka addresses homosexuality. Specifically, they should note how some of the story's characters react to gays, lesbians, and to Yvonne and Babes' relationship. Having students contemplate the various negative and positive ways of thinking in the story can help give rise to deeper classroom considerations of some of the broad social contexts currently affecting and shaping community and cultural attitudes about gays and lesbians.

Like many American cities, Emi's hometown appears to have its fair share of gays, lesbians, and cross-dressers. According to Emi, there are gays and lesbians in the high schools and intermediate schools; they go to "ball games, the mall, the beach," and they cruise "Banyan Drive, the game rooms, pool halls, concerts, movies" (12). Whether "tough aunties with pretty girlfriends, uncles with soft voices and buffed bodies," or "uncles who are sometimes aunties all mingling and hanging out at our parties and family gatherings" (12), there is a strong sense that homosexuality is a part of Emi's town and social surroundings.

Regrettably, so are prejudice and bigotry. Ignorance flourishes in places where it is socially acceptable, and Emi's hometown is certainly not exempt. Indeed, the story provides ample examples of how prejudice, anti-gay attitudes, and social biases toward homosexuals are being conveyed in Emi's social surroundings. For instance, consider the behavior of a number of students at Emi's school. On several occasions, Emi alludes to the problem of student name-calling and labeling. Whether students call other students dumb, smart, wanna-be, Jap-girl, gifted and talented, "half-dumb

Portagee" (38), or fatso, there seems to be a lot of nasty pigeonholing going on in Emi's high school. Most disturbing is the use of name-calling based on gender/sexual identity. Readers learn, for example, that while Emi sits on the school bleachers watching a softball game, a girl name Gina Mahina starts to pick on her. Apparently, after she kicks Emi's bag, Gina verbally attacks Emi by calling her a "bench-warming lez" (66), and then proceeds to kick and push Emi's back. In the same way, when Rudy Rudman (Emi's male friend who is gay) tells Gina to stop picking on Emi, Gina responds to him by saying, "You stop it, faggot" (66).

To many, this war of words between Gina, Emi, and Rudy may appear meaningless. But it is not. In fact, when Gina resorts to this type of name-calling and uses the words "lez" and "faggot," she is actually engaging in a form of homophobic harassment and bullying. Painful and disruptive, the homophobic words Gina tosses around are more than just dreadful words. They are weapons and a form of group-biased name-calling that uses the name of a group -- such as "faggot" or "dyke" -- as the slur. Using names like these implies that there is something wrong with being a member of that group. Undeniably, this type of name-calling can be devastating to young people experiencing homosexual feelings. Not only that, this type of hate speech reinforces heterosexism by compelling people who are not gay or lesbian to adhere to strict heterosexual sex/gender role behaviors to avoid ridicule. In the end, when people like Gina resort to homophobic name-calling, they help to facilitate the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, and help to reinforce hostility toward gays and lesbians. Young readers need to know that seemingly innocuous words like "fag" or "dyke" can cause harm, and that the bias-motivated act of homophobic name-

calling can hurt people.

Besides teenagers like Gina, there are adults in Emi's life just as blameworthy of spreading homophobia and bigotry. Foremost is Emi's uninformed uncle, Uncle Charlie.

Granted, Emi's uncle does not overtly resort to intimidating name-calling like Gina. However, by all accounts he is disposed to faulty assumptions and negative stereotypes about homosexuals, which makes him potentially just as harmful. For starters, bear in mind that Uncle Charlie forbids people to use the words "*lesbian* or *butchie*" in his presence (12). He also suggests that all of the women playing for the local softball teams are lesbians, commenting that "Those wahines all so . . . man, they all so short hair, man clothes, truck driving . . . so damn ballsy - " (12). Even more telling, perhaps, is the fact that Uncle Charlie is always fussing over Emi's friendship with Yvonne. Why? Because he is fearful that others might perceive their closeness as "butchie." Time and again, he admonishes Yvonne for referring to Emi as "Louie" in public, saying: "And you, Yvonne, no call her [Emi] Louie, you hear me? They all might think you're a couple of . . . of . . . sheez, just listen to me - " (11). Obviously, Uncle Charlie's reactions to Emi and Yvonne's friendship, and to the women's softball teams demonstrate an inability to look beyond the usual stereotypical depictions and societal prejudices associated with homosexuality, especially with lesbians. Much of what he says and does throughout the story validates and transmits bigotry to Emi and to others around him. Like Gina, his anti-homosexual actions and reactions undoubtedly add to the societal burden of gays and lesbians.

It is important to note that Yamanaka's story does offer readers more than a collection of people like Gina and Uncle Charlie who unconstructively judge

homosexuals. Agreed, there are some characters in the story who think that being gay or lesbian is all about sex; when it comes to homosexuality, there are people in the story who fail to consider the intricacies of the whole person. However, categorizing Yamanaka's story as a skeptical editorial on societal struggles between straights and gays would be an oversight. As a matter of fact, the overall message of this story is encouraging and optimistic, and to balance the some of the story's pessimism, Yamanaka creates some valuable characters for readers to consider. Most notable are Emi's aforementioned grandmother, Leatrice; and Sterling, one of Emi's friends. Promisingly, both share an unquestionable willingness to look beyond sexual orientation, and an interest in transmitting messages of acceptance, tolerance, and social diversity. Paying particular attention to how these characters react to homosexuality can go a long way in helping young readers understand how tolerance can help put an end to the harmful myths, prejudices, and stale societal sex/gender coding encircling the gay and lesbian communities.

Like a number of the story's characters, Emi also has difficulty comprehending and supporting Yvonne's sexual orientation. Throughout the story, she struggles to make sense of Yvonne's decisions, and spends a lot of time trying to convince herself that Yvonne's sexual involvement with Babes is not normal; to Emi, Yvonne cannot be a lesbian because she is simply "not like that" (12). It is worth mentioning that from time to time, Emi devises strategies to keep "Babes away from Von" (88), and says things like: "But Von is not a butchie. And she'll never be one. Not if I can do something about it" (46). Clearly, Emi is confused. So, for help with the all of the uncertainties related to Yvonne, love, friendship, sexual orientation and normalcy, Emi turns to

her courageous, gritty grandmother Leatrice for assistance. Fortunately for her, Leatrice consistently provides thoughtful answers and constructive advice.

For instance, Yvonne's struggle to assert a sexual identity causes Emi to question what it means to be "normal" when it comes to sexual orientation. When Emi asks Leatrice if it is okay for girls to love girls when they really "love each other," Leatrice says, "Of course it is. Love is complicated and way more than just sex" (216). Also, when Emi asks her grandmother if she would love her if she was a lesbian, Leatrice replies, "Even if you was lesbian, celibate, promiscuous, super-religious, atheist, vegetarian, save the rain forest, save the whales - in the end, you would still be mine, 'cause you one Kaya. Get what I saying? Love is love. You receive it in whatever form it arrives in" (184). Without a doubt, Leatrice knows that being gay or lesbian is not something that can be "cured" by a visit to a high school counselor or psychologist. Fervently, she reminds Emi that being gay or lesbian does not make someone a bad person. As it happens, Leatrice tells Emi that Yvonne is "somebody good" (216), and that as far as she is concerned, "Yvonne is who she is. You cannot change that. She was born the way she is" (184). Over and over again, Leatrice reacts to Emi's questions regarding Yvonne and her sexual identity with certainty. In the end, she constructs a message that is straightforward and hard for Emi and young readers to ignore: as human beings, we're all connected, and an individual's choice in sex partners has little to do with the ability to feel love or loss, joy or pain.

In the same way, Sterling also helps with Emi's schooling on homosexuality. Like Leatrice, Sterling imparts valuable lessons concerning homosexuality, normalcy, and acceptance. To repeat, Emi's predicament involves not accepting Yvonne for who

she is; again, she spends a great deal of time the story trying to convince herself and others that Yvonne is not a “butchie,” and that her best friend is “normal.” Her thinking, of course, implies that Yvonne’s lesbian identity is not normal, and on at least two occasions, Sterling boldly challenges Emi’s unapprised opinions. Consider, for example, that when Louie says to Sterling that she and Yvonne are simply friends -- that they are both “normal” (82) -- he responds to her by saying: “Normal? . . . Look around this town. Look around this school, the softball league. Get plenty of girls . . . girls, girls, girls, not really out in the open, but ain’t no secret either . . . So what exactly is normal, right?” (82). Also, when Emi implies that Babes has something to do with Yvonne’s apparent fall from sexual normalcy, he replies: “Normal? . . . What if that’s [being a lesbian] what she is? Tell the truth - Von is the most normal, loyal person you know. She one of my best friends. She your sister - “ (120). Both reactions illustrate Sterling’s interest in enlightening Emi, and in helping her move toward awareness and acceptance of homosexuals.

Above all, Sterling’s reactions to Emi also reflect a willingness to confront narrow-minded judgments of gays, lesbians, and societal sex roles. Arguably, this more than anything else is what makes his character praiseworthy and worthy of reader’s attention. Like Leatrice, Sterling is bold enough to challenge Emi and readers to think about artificial societal constructions of sexual/gender normality. Based on much of what he says and does, Sterling obviously believes in diversity when it comes to sex/gender roles. Likewise, he also admires Yvonne and lets Emi and readers know that she deserves respect because she has the “guts” to be different in a society where everyone is “going the same way, . . . thinking the same, doing the same thing” (205).

To Sterling, Yvonne and Babes' relationship is a love affair between two people; to him, there is no need to say "between two gays, two lesbians, or two homosexuals. No doubt, because of Sterling and Leatrice's counseling, Emi discovers (and, hopefully, so do young readers!) that there is more to people than their sexual orientation.

Fortunately by story's end, this awareness and acceptance allows Emi to regain what she desires most: Yvonne's trust, support, and their "deeper than the deep blue sea" (227) friendship.

As Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Name Me Nobody* points out, being different in high school and in society can be difficult for anyone, especially if difference is related to sexual orientation. Admittedly, addressing homosexuality and lesbianism can be frightening even for the most confident language arts teacher. However, because homosexuality is such a significant issue in America, teachers should never be allowed to use marginal support from administration, fear, ignorance, or lack of curriculum as reasons for not teaching students about all forms of discrimination, oppression and injustice -- including homophobia. Although sexuality should never be an issue in school, it is. Prejudice, bullying, homophobic name-calling, and other anti-homosexual behaviors should not be issues in society. But they are. All secondary language arts teachers, therefore, must commit themselves to dealing with these issues. Doing so is a positive step toward eliminating hate.

