True Stories, Trans Stories, and More in New Picture Books

by Dana Rudolph | drudolph@mombian.com

New books can be a delightful relief in these days of quarantine. Here are some of the many new LGBTQ-inclusive picture books coming out in May. (See mombian.com for even more.)

“The Fighting Infantryman,” by Rob Sanders and illustrated by Nabi H. Ali (Little Bee), is the true story of Albert D. J. Cashier, a transgender soldier in the U.S. Civil War. At 19, Albert, an immigrant from Ireland who had been assigned female at birth but had long presented a male identity, enlisted in the Union Army. After the war, he was always proud of having been a “fighting infantryman.” When in his later years, he was listed in the Union Army.

H. Ali (Little Bee), is the true story of Rob Sanders and illustrated by Nabi

“I can't talk—Turner Movie Classics is showing 'Limpet'!”

— Carole Cook to a friend who called to check in on her.

find Billy Masters on page 6!
Brian had his HIV under control with medication. But smoking with HIV caused him to have serious health problems, including a stroke, a blood clot in his lungs and surgery on an artery in his neck. Smoking makes living with HIV much worse. You can quit. CALL 1-800-QUIT-NOW.

HIV alone didn’t cause the clogged artery in my neck. Smoking with HIV did.

Brian, age 45, California
In the Quiet and the Darkness

by Judah Leblang | www.JudahLeblang.com

contributing writer

I am sitting in the dark—or more accurately a mix of candlelight and the flashlight on my iPhone—listening to footsteps and chatter from my upstairs neighbor and her guests, who is clearly not observing social distance guidelines. It has been raining all day, a hard-driving, wind-driven rain, and after we made it through that storm, around 7pm, my power went off.

I sit here listening to the wind outside and the footsteps above, feeling a bit envious of my neighbor and the idea, which feels like a fantasy of the time that came before a time that's gone, of having guests, friends, a visitor in my apartment. It’s been four weeks since anyone (in that case a date, a rarity) crossed my threshold. Now my conversations happen on Zoom, on the phone, or via text and email, which doesn't replace the real space/real time connection that happens when one shares physical space.

I position my phone and try to write by its beacon. Earlier in the day, when I had light and power, I watched the news and weather updates, the litany of COVID-19 reports, the ever-increasing numbers and preparation for the surge. Fighting a cold, I was glad for the comfort it brought. Those sirens warn of the dangers outside my door, the virus that has transformed our lives over the course of just a few weeks, so that society is almost unrecognizable.

Beyond electricity, I think of all the things I took for granted before the pandemic: a visit to a friend’s apartments; singing in the choir or chanting at Arlington Street Church; spending a few hours with my Mom at her assisted living place in Cleveland, or taking her to dinner, or going for a drink with my one of my writer friends. Perhaps, when life returns to some version of normal, I’ll be more thoughtful and more appreciative of those small moments, which remind me of all the things I can’t currently do, of those life activities that are off the table.

After about two hours, the lights blink and my power comes back on. The next morning the sun comes out, and a few days later, my cold finally breaks. I meet a friend for a socially distant walk in the Fells and with real human contact, my mood begins to lift, at least for a few hours.

Judah Leblang is a writer, teacher and storyteller in Boston. His new memoir, Echoes of Jerry, is available at www.judahleblang.com

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Rosendall

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professor. When NewsHour White House correspondent Yamiche Alcindor interviewed, “WH pandemics office was dismantled by Trump administration,” Trump press secretary Kayleigh McEnany denied it and called her de- nial a fact check. Excuse me, but someone who lies for a living is a fact checker in approximately the same sense that a man with antlers mounted on his wall is an animal rights activist.

Trump and his defenders know they are spouting lies and nonsense. If testing is overturned, why is so much of it done every day in the White House? Dismissing test- ing except for himself is Trump’s way of asking us to die quietly and disappear.

Then there is the Trumpers’ exploitation of Tara Reade’s charge that Joe Biden sexually assaulted her in the early 1990s. In response to Natasha Koreck’s May 15 Politico story challenging Reade’s credibility, one reader tweeted, “Yeah that’s nice, but Tara Reade is still credible and Biden is still a rapist.” I must have read that too fast, because I completely missed anything resembling an arg- ument. Taking sexual assault charges seriously means investigating them, not ignoring the evidence one way or the other and proceeding directly to sentencing.

Facts still count. The more Ms. Reade’s shifting claims are investigated, the more they collapse. That aside, it only harms the #MeToo movement to weaponize sexual assault allegations in service of a misogynist who was recording boasting about sexual assaults. Trump and his operatives seek not to do justice for women but to neu- tralize the issue by distracting the waters.

Donald’s next devilry was the Friday night firing of State Department inspector general Steve Linick. As Washington Post reporter Hannah Knowles writes, the firing “is the latest in a string of weekend removals of oversight officials who have clashed with the Trump ad- ministration.” Trump blithely declares, “Article II allows me to do whatever I want.” In his mind, reality miracu- lously conforms itself to his every impulse.

Outside his mind, we are tasked with defending our fellow citizens. It will avail us little if we get out of our houses but refuse to get out of our heads and pay attention to our fellow citizens.

This country belongs to all of us, not to a pathological narcissist who won via the Electoral College amid ram- pant voter suppression and disinformation. He accuses Barack Obama of “the most incompetent and corrupt

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Sydney

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son’s death after he was found at the base of a cliff near Manly’s North Head on Dec. 10, 1988. In the first in- quest, his death was ruled a suicide. The second inquest, in June 2012, returned an open finding.

However, the third inquest, in 2017, found that Johnson fell from the clifftop as the result of violence by an unidentified attacker who perceived him to be gay.

A 1 million Australian dollar ($647,000) reward for information leading to an arrest in the case was offered in 2018, and Johnson’s family in March pledged to match that amount.

New South Wales state Police Commissioner Mick Fuller said in a statement Tuesday that he had been in contact with Johnson’s brother Steve in Boston to form him of the arrest.

“Making that phone call this morning is a career high—Steve has fought so hard for so many years, and it has been an honor be part of his fight for justice,” Fuller said.

Steve Johnson said in a statement that his brother symbolizes those who lost their lives to homophobic-inspired violence.

“It’s emotional for me, emotional for my family, my two sisters and brother who loved Scott dearly, my wife and three kids who never got to know their uncle,” Johnson said.

“I am outraged by his death. I want to be able to challenge that my beliefs and my story. My story is the story of us. My story is the story that we fight for. My story is the story that we don’t give up. And my story is the story of hope and love and change. And I will not give up on that story. And I will not give up on my story. And I will not give up on my love and my hope and my change.”

Johnson was due to be a keynote speaker at a climate change conference in Sydney this year.

Steve Johnson said his brother graduated at the top of his class at CalTech and later studied at Cambridge and Harvard universities before moving to Australia.

A 2018 police review of 88 suspicious deaths from 1976 to 2000 revealed that 27 men were likely mur- dered for their homosexuality by gangs, with cases peak- ing in the late 1980s and early ’90s.

ACON, New South Wales’ leading sexuality and gen- der-diverse health organization, said it has been a long and difficult process for Johnson’s family and friends.

“While this is a significant development in this par- ticular case, it highlights the need for ongoing investiga- tion, truth-telling and the delivery of justice for so many other gay men and trans people, who were murdered or bashed in similar cases,” ACON’s chief executive, Nico- las Parkhill, said in a statement.

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Mombian

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admitted to a veteran’s hospital and his biological sex be- came known, he almost lost his military pension.

His former comrades stood up for him, though, and he retained it—and upon his death, his gravestone re- flected his military unit and chosen name. Sanders notes in an afterward that while transgender people have al- ways existed, terminology has changed across time and cultures.

Nevertheless, “it’s possible, even likely” that Cashier was transgender. In the story, Sanders reinforces the way Cashier lived his life as he wanted to. I hope the friends and families of the other dozens of gay men who lost their lives find solace in what’s happened today and hope it opens the door to resolve some of the other mysterious deaths of men who have not yet received jus- tice,” he said.

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Violet Tobacco (Magination Press) is a series of reflec- tions by a child (who reads as female) about her parent who is “neither a boy nor a girl.” Throughout the book, the protagonist observes her Maddie’s love of things that are in-between, such as a sundress, which is neither day nor night, but “kind of both, and something all its own.”

Similarly, Maddie loves motorcycles (neither car nor bicycle, but something of their own) and, with a touch of humor, spark. We also see how Maddie cares for their child, making snacks, reading bedtime stories, and wish- ing sweet dreams. Both the child and Maddie are White.

It’s a loving portrait—and a detailed Note to Read- ers offers adults information and guidance from clinical psychologist Randall Ehrbar on intersex, transgender, non-binary, and other gender diverse parents.

Two young queer people are telling their own sto- ries in two books. “Be Amazing: A History of Pride,” by “Drag Kid” Desmond Is Amazing (Farrar Straus Gir- rous), is less a detailed history than a short overview of the Stonewall Riots and the first March one year later; brief biographies of Stonewall icons Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera; and a personal description of the in- fluence Pride has had on Desmond’s life.

A mention of President Obama’s declaration of Pride Month in 2009 makes it seems as if that ac- tion legitimized the observance. The book is more ef- fective when Desmond tells us about his first time at Pride, becoming a “viral drag sensation,” and how he was inspired by RuPaul (who gets a short bio) and other LGBTQ icons (several of whom are named without fur- ther information).

What it lacks is a full history it makes up for with an enthusiastic message to “Be amazing,” and with dazzling illustrations from Dylan Glynn.

“I’m Not a Girl,” by Maddox Lyons, a 12-year-old transgender boy, and Jessica Verdi, with illustrations by Dana Simpson (Roaring Brook), is based on Lyons’ own journey as a transgender boy. “I know girls are cool,” the protagonist (who is White) says, in a thoughtful touch. “I just’m not one.”

Picture day at school and Halloween (with highly gendered costumes) are particularly difficult. One day, he explains to some new friends that everyone thinks he’s a girl, though he’s really a boy. The friends (who are Black) observe that he’s like their cousin, a transgender girl.

Lyons gathers his courage and speaks with his parents about his true identity. They listen and support him in getting a haircut. A heartfelt and personal story.

For preschoolers, “Kevin Keller’s Favorite Colors,” from Little Bee Books, stars the Archie comics’ first gay character explaining the meaning of each of the colors in the Pride flag (including the recent additions of black and brown), as other characters from the comic dem- onstrate.

Three very similar books came out last year: Little Bee’s own board book “Our Rainbow”; “Rainbow: A First Book of Pride,” by Michael Genhart (Magina- tion Press); and Robin Stevenson’s poetic “Pride Colors” board book (Orca). Aside from the use of Archie charac- ters, this book adds little that is different—and one might wonder whether a comic depicting high schoolers will really appeal to children still learning their colors. Adult fans may want it for their children, though, even if the genre feels saturated.

Dana Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian (mombian.com), a GLAAD Media Award-winning blog and resource directory for LGBTQ parents. Join her June 1, 2020, for #LGBTQFamiliesDay: post, tweet, and share in celebration and support of LGBTQ families.

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Richard J. Rosendall is a writer and activist at rrosendall@me.com.

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Rosendall

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Pride

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