



Sanchez, Alex (b. 1957)

by Kimberly Pauley

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Alex Sanchez.
Image courtesy Alex Sanchez.

Alex Sanchez's unique background as a youth and family counselor and his experiences as an immigrant have helped make him an important voice in today's young adult glbtq literature canon.

Born in Mexico City, Mexico on April 23, 1957 to parents of both Cuban and German descent, Sanchez immigrated with his family to Texas in 1962 at the age of five.

At that time, Mexicans faced a great deal of official and unofficial prejudice within the state. Like most young people, Sanchez wanted to fit in and belong. He worked hard to learn English and stopped speaking Spanish completely.

In a panel discussion at the 2003 National Council of Teachers of English convention, he explained, "Because of my light-skinned father and his German last name (not Sanchez), I learned I could pass as white. I could hide who I was, so that others would like and accept me."

At age 13, Sanchez realized that he was gay. He once again experienced feelings of being an outsider. But this time he felt there was no one he could talk to or relate to. He found no books in the library that described what he was going through, and none to tell him that what he felt was okay.

"So," he explained, "just as I had learned to hide that I was Mexican, I tried to hide that I was gay. I became depressed, quiet, invisible, trying to escape calling attention to myself."

Sanchez attended Virginia Tech University, where he received a Bachelor of Arts with honors in 1978, and Old Dominion University, where he graduated with a Master's degree in Education in guidance and counseling in 1985. He worked as a family and youth counselor for ten years. During that time, he began to write the story that would eventually become *Rainbow Boys* (2001).

Eight years in the writing, *Rainbow Boys* immediately garnered many honors upon release, including the American Library Association's "Best Book for Young Adults" and a "Flying Start" designation for Sanchez from *Publisher's Weekly*.

The book features three distinct and well-developed gay teens: an "out-and-proud" gay activist, a jock who starts the book with a girlfriend and family issues, and a low-key closeted teen who experiences prejudice due to his friendship with the more flamboyant character.

The characters' stories are continued in *Rainbow High* (2003) and *Rainbow Road* (2005). The New York Public Library honored both books as "Books for the Teen Age." *Rainbow High* was also a Lambda Literary Award finalist, an award that Sanchez later won for *So Hard to Say* (2004), a novel for younger readers featuring two 13-year-old protagonists who tell the story in alternating chapters: Xio, a pretty, popular Latina looking for a boyfriend, and Frederick, shy, cute, and sexually confused.

Sanchez is one of the few authors (another being James Howe, who wrote *The Misfits* and *Totally Joe*) to write glbtq fiction for the middle-grade audience. Besides *So Hard to Say*, his short story, "If You Kiss a Boy" appeared in the fall 2003 anthology *13: Thirteen Stories about the Agony and Ecstasy of Being Thirteen*, edited by Howe.

Sanchez, in a 2004 interview with ATLANTAboy.com, explains how he came to write for a younger audience: "After I put up my Web site, AlexSanchez.com, I started to get a lot of e-mails from thirteen-year-old boys who said that my first novel, "Rainbow Boys," had inspired them. I also heard from a lot of middle school teachers and librarians who said they desperately needed these types of books for students who are ten to fourteen."

Considering that the average age most gay Americans now "come out" has dropped from age 21 (in 1979) to around 15 today (and as low as ten), the need for middle-grade glbtq fiction is obvious.

Sanchez's latest works feature timely topics and considerable crossover appeal with straight teens, especially teenage girls. In an interview with the *Sydney Star Observer*, Sanchez notes "I get a lot of emails from my gay and lesbian readers, adults and teenagers, but it turns out that straight teenage girls are actually my biggest audience--they love reading about gay boys."

Getting It (2006) features a straight Latino protagonist who asks a gay teen for a makeover à la *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The experience winds up changing his outlook and his life. He even helps set up a new Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club at his school.

The God Box (2007) touches on the highly charged question of religion and sexuality with a focus on the friendship between two Christian teenage boys, one of whom happens to be openly gay.

While Sanchez's novels have been widely championed by school librarians and educators, they have also faced attempts at censorship. *Rainbow Boys*, in particular, has faced a number of challenges, such as in the Webster Central School District in New York where parents complained when the book appeared on the high school summer reading list (despite protests from local librarians, the book was removed from the list).

The book was also cited for including references to masturbation and homosexual sex by Linda P. Harvey of Mission America (a conservative Christian group that advocates against homosexuality and paganism and specifically targets teens) in Columbus, Ohio, in her inflammatory (and homophobic) essay "The World According to PFLAG: Why PFLAG and Children Don't Mix Unless You Happen to Like Child Abuse."

Other challenges, such as one in Owen, Wisconsin, ended with the book remaining available in the library, but requiring parent's or guardian's permission to check it out.

Alex Sanchez is one of today's most influential authors for the glbtq young adult market. His popularity and success is due to many factors, but most notably his believable characters, the timely and relevant storylines of his novels, and the broad appeal of the stories to both gay and straight teens.

Sanchez's books have helped countless gay teens accept themselves while at the same time helping straight readers understand and empathize with gay teens.

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About the Author

Kimberly Pauley is the founder of the YABC (Young Adult Books Central) website. She specialized in adolescent and children's literature at the University of Florida and graduated with a degree in English. An avid reader and writer, her first novel, tentatively titled *Sucks to Be Me: The All-True Confessions of Mina Hamilton, Teen Vampire* is due out in Fall 2008.