

## Chapter 23: YA On the Air: A Scaffolded Podcast Assignment on YA Literature

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### 2. *Healing Through Narratives* by Alexis Garcia, Anika Flores, and Gabriela Martinez, Episode 1: “Voice of the Dead”

This episode of *Healing Through Narratives* explores the relevance of counter-storytelling in historically underrepresented folks using David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing*. The episode features “The Recollectors,” a storytelling community consisting of families and children, who are now adults, whose relatives died as a result of the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and ’90s.

#### Transcript

[*Music: Janet Jackson’s “Together Again” starts loud and continues faded under the narration. It’s an upbeat track with a prominent beat, keyboards, and bass. Jackson sings, “Everywhere I go, every smile I see, I know you are there, smiling back at me. Dancin’ in moonlight, I know you are free, cause I can see your star shining down on me.”*]

**Host (Gabriela):** That’s the lovely Janet Jackson pumping up our show today! Did you know that she actually wrote this song in dedication to a fellow close friend of hers who died, unfortunately, from AIDS? Yeah, really emotional! Alright, welcome to *Healing Through Narratives*, a podcast for our young adults devoted to exploring the relevance of counter-storytelling in historically underrepresented folks! I am your host today, Gaby Martinez, and today, we will be talking about the unconventional narration in David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing*. Now, this novel is about various scenarios involving a group of LGBTQ youth and their various experiences of one coming out and also how they struggle to maintain their identity.

[*Music fades out completely.*]

As I was reading the novel, I noticed that there were a lot of references made to the AIDS epidemic that occurred in the 1980s and ’90s. And part of this is also generated by the narrators themselves, who consist of a chorus of gay men who died from the AIDS epidemic and were narrating various scenes in the book. The point is that the commentary made by this chorus of individuals is an example of counter-storytelling regarding the experiences of a diverse group of LGBTQ individuals in this novel. And joining me today in discussing the narration of the novel are two members of The Recollectors, a storytelling community consisting of families and children, who are now adults, whose relatives died as a result of the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and ’90s. Before I start today, however, I would like to offer a language disclaimer because of some mild use of strong language that we will be discussing from the book, that is particularly relevant to this discussion today.

Alright! Thank you for joining me all today! Why don’t we start off by briefly introducing ourselves? If I may ask also one of you to explain the organization’s purpose that you are involved in.

**Recollector 1 (Anika):** Thank you for having us! My name is Anika, and I’ve been a member of the Recollectors for a few years now. We’re a community that was created by two friends named Alysia Abbott and Whitney Joiner, who lost their fathers to AIDS in 1992. They created this community in order to give people who had family members that

died of AIDS a way to connect to others who have experienced the same kind of loss. Unfortunately, there is still a stigma surrounding AIDS, and so those who have lost relatives to this can feel as though they have no one to talk to about it, or no one who could understand them and share their feelings. This community serves as a way for these people to share the stories of their relatives and continue to bring the history of the AIDS crisis to light. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

**Recollector 2 (Alexis):** Yes, I'm excited to be here today! My name is Alexis, and I discovered this digital community, The Recollectors, about a year ago. Aligned with the purpose of the group, this group published my story about how I lost my dad to AIDS. Even though there is still a lot of bullying against the LGBTQIA community today, AIDS is no longer talked about the way it was when I was a child, so having a group that relates to my experiences gives me the opportunity to remember my dad, and ultimately has made this group very special to me. I am super thank-you to Alysia and Whitney for creating this group, and for you having us here today!

**Host:** Alright, awesome! Thank you for the warm introductions! I would like to start off by asking about the book's cover. Now in *Two Boys Kissing*, we have a diverse, like I mentioned before, we have a diverse range of characters who each have different experiences with their identity in the LGBTQIA community. Our first impression is that we see two boys kissing; however, based on what you have read in the book, how does this cover mentioned already reflect the way LGBTQIA fiction has progressed throughout time, as unconsciously mentioned by the chorus in the book? The recognition of sexuality in young adult fiction is relatively recent, from Judy Blume's novels to Levithan's own novels and his collaborations with Rachel Cohn and fellow young adult writer John Green. I'm really curious to hear your thoughts.

**Recollector 2 (Alexis):** I can start. We supposedly live in a time where it is "okay to be gay." However, at the end of the book the author says, "This isn't a book I could have written ten years back." And I couldn't agree more with this. When I was in my teens, I don't think I ever saw queer literature. Now, we have this book which I believe has contributed to the demand for progress in the LGBTQIA community, especially with the cover. By having a cover with an image that shows two boys kissing, it shows how much more we are accepting and connected to this community compared to ten and twenty years ago.

**Recollector 1 (Anika):** I completely agree. I mean, even just the title makes it evident that this book is about gay youth and that it is not something that needs to be hidden anymore. By having the cover show these boys kissing and having the phrase "two boys kissing" in large letters over them, I think it just goes to show how far we have progressed as a society when it comes to representation of the LGBTQIA community. Not to say that progress doesn't still need to be made, but this is certainly an improvement and something that wasn't as prominent in novels of the past. I think this cover really helps to destigmatize the LGBTQIA community and allow for people to see members of this community as equal human beings, instead of as something that is taboo or that has to be kept in the shadows.

**Host:** I really like each of your responses; they were really enlightening for me! Interesting insight that I haven't actually even thought of. I think there was actually a reference towards the end of the book, in which . . . as a matter of fact, let me just find this really quickly, and if I could find it . . . ah! There we go! On page 195, it says, "If you play your cards right, the next generation will have much more than you did," and for me, this is the chorus telling us that in order for our community to have more

representation, members of our own community must act in a way that puts a few of us in danger, and if you do so properly, as . . . we'll have, as Anika said, our greater society look up upon us. And in most of our history textbooks, actually, we are usually told that LGBTQIA community fought peacefully to obtain their civil rights; however, as the chorus of men in this novel indicate otherwise, peaceful and not so peaceful protest was done, as you can see in the examples of the Stonewall Riots as a really good example.

Now, there's a scene that caught my particular attention, in particular because of the numerous subtle historical references made. That I believe was on page 66 of our novel? And it was when Ryan asked Avery about his pink hair, to which Avery's reply was because he liked the color pink and that gender itself is just, if I may quote, "stupid arbitrary shit." The chorus challenges Avery's notion by referring to many of the events that these men themselves have experienced such as the death of a hemophiliac teenager, which I believe they were referring to Ryan White, who was a hemophiliac diagnosed with HIV who later progressed to AIDS, and also referencing to President Reagan's delayed response to the AIDS crisis itself. Referring to this scene and also based on your own experiences, how does this scene enable the chorus to challenge our reader's perception that all experiences of LGBTQIA folks are the same? I'm asking basically, like, in what way does the chorus of men offer another side of the previously mentioned narratives that we have learned so far, and how does this part of the passage relate to what you are currently engaging as a Recollector?

**Recollecter 1 (Anika):** I think this scene was really important and one of the reasons I could tell that I was reading something different and special. It really does highlight both the differences and similarities between the gay community of the past and present, which is something that any reader should be aware of. When Avery was referring to things that were stupid and arbitrary, he likely wasn't thinking of the AIDS crisis or of the pain and loss going on during that time, and yet his statement rings true to this chorus of gay men who are watching over him. He was referring to the stupid, arbitrary stuff of our present society, but it could also easily be used to refer to the stupid, arbitrary stuff of the past. It's stuff like this that shows that, yes, there is common thread between the LGBTQIA community of the past and of the present, as they all unfortunately must put up with these negative aspects of society, but there is still this difference between them, as Avery will not understand or have to deal with the AIDS crisis as the gay generation of the past had to. This passage also really ties into what we try to do as Recollectors, which is continue to spread the stories of our deceased relatives. It's not often you have a young adult novel that speaks so candidly about the AIDS crisis, and about how the U.S. government's failure to work quickly led to the loss of many people's lives. I thought this particular line from the passage on page 66 was especially significant: "What a horrible feeling that is, to know that if the disease had primarily affected PTA presidents, or priests, or white teenage girls, the epidemic would have been ended years earlier, and tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of lives would have been saved." It's a heartbreaking truth, but also one that I think is really important, and I'm glad this quote was included in the book because this side of the community is having their story be told, especially to today's youth.

**Host:** Hmm, yeah, definitely. I couldn't agree more with what you said so far, especially with the relevance of the U.S. government's failure to work quickly, and the quote that you included was really, it's . . . I didn't even think about it. It was a really excellent quote. Thank you for sharing that. Alright Alexis, what do you think?

**Recollecter 2 (Alexis):** Much of what is being discussed here in this passage that is dismissing experiences and choices with the phrase "stupid arbitrary shit" is completely

forgetting to recognize that there is more than one specific experience that someone from the LGBTQIA community can go through. Not everything can be disguised and can be labeled simply because the complexity of each and every individual, their choices, and their circumstances make them uniquely attached to it. It is not okay to assume and push aside certain societal and personal experiences. “Stupid arbitrary shit” brought much awareness to the fact that this issue isn’t only attached to small things such as hair color and the gender binaries of wearing pink and blue, but also larger and important things like how AIDS was dealt with on a public level but also on the personal level, which we deal with differently according to our identities. And most importantly, even though many of the experiences are unique and so called “arbitrary,” we set aside much room to unite and were able to do this through the Recollectors and our stories.

**Host:** I really liked your connection with the whole concept of identity and with AIDS, too. That it emphasizes the experiences that every individual has and also further reiterates that there are different experiences, not only among those who have AIDS themselves but also folks in the LGBTQIA community. That’s really, I really liked your reference too. So I just have one more thing to address, and that is a passage on page 128 . . . perfect, I found it! It was the scene in which Avery was listening to a morning talk show host in which the host itself received many homophobic calls regarding Harry and Craig’s world-record kiss. Like I mentioned earlier, various scenarios of LGBTQIA youth are occurring simultaneously. Anyway, just to get . . . anyway, one of the callers claimed that “You can’t have a world record if you’re two guys. That’s not a world record.” And the narrators, the chorus of men, expressed that, if I may quote, “In the darkest part of our hearts, we used to think that maybe they were right. We don’t think that anymore.” How do you two think this is an example of counter-storytelling, and in what way does this particular scene . . . is a lesson for the youth in this novel, considering they are from another generation?

**Recollector 2 (Alexis):** I think this is a perfect example of counter-storytelling because of how it brings about topics that usually are not talked about, so-called “taboo” matters, in this case one concerning two men. The fact that someone else is also the one sharing about this experience of the two men kissing and setting a world record makes it even more of a counter-storytelling example, which also is something that causes the audience to react and shut it down completely—the idea or even fact that this happened at all. It is a lesson to understand that just because it’s different doesn’t mean it didn’t happen or that its not valid. It’s an encouragement to keep sharing about the LGBTQIA experiences.

**Host:** Really wonderful. Anika?

**Recollector 1 (Anika):** Um, I believe that this demonstrates counter-storytelling because this quote is coming from a point of view that we don’t get to hear from as often. Especially in this case, the quote is countering the homophobic voices on the radio. I find that really important and powerful, because this novel is allowing the voices of the dead to speak up and fight back against these homophobic comments in a way that they usually wouldn’t be able to. Even though they are dead, they are still allowed to have their stories told, and that’s really everything our community stands for. It can be easy to ignore the voices of the dead, or to disregard them as unimportant, but I think they’re incredibly relevant and necessary, and I think this novel really highlights that by allowing them to comment on the things going on in the world and in the lives of these gay teens. I think that’s the lesson for the youth that you mentioned: it teaches the young people in the novel to sort of think about this generation before them, and to keep them in mind.

**Host:** Oh right, yeah, I really like the various connections that you two folks made with the generation gap, and that's really important.

[*Jackson's "Together Again" begins playing again under the Host's closing statements below.*]

**Host:** [At 13 min. 36 sec, music begins to fade to play at low volume.] Well, as much as I would like to continue our conversation, our time together has run out. I would like to thank Alexis and Anika from The Recollectors for joining us to address this week's book! Thank you also to my wonderful listeners for joining us on this episode of *Healing Through Narratives*. I encourage you all to tell your friends to read *Two Boys Kissing*, as they can learn a lot through its unique narration. It also offers a great historical perspective on an event that often gets glossed over by our history books such as LGBTQIA rights and the AIDS crisis. Remember to give voice to those who have been taught to hide it! Tune in to our next episode, "Exposing Social Inequality Through Storytelling!" In the meantime, take care everyone.

[*Music continues briefly before fading out.*]