

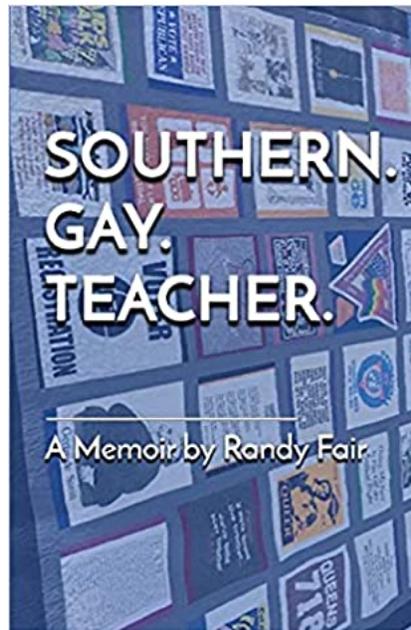
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Review of *Southern Gay Teacher: A Memoir by Randy Fair*

By Randy Fair

Reviewer: James Coda
University of Georgia, Athens, GA



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Overview

Southern Gay Teacher: A Memoir by Randy Fair chronicles the experiences of an English teacher, Randy Fair, in the Southeastern United States as he navigates communities and school environments that are not always welcoming towards those with non-normative identities, such as LGBTQ-identified individuals. In the prologue, Fair begins his story in the 1970's and describes the context of his small, conservative town of Weaver, Alabama as one where an LGBTQ-identified individual would have to remain silent regarding their non-normative identity. In his small town, Fair describes how "gay people just didn't exist" (p. 17). Moreover, attention to LGBTQ issues was not prevalent in the school nor the curriculum. However, as Fair also illustrates, it was the teachers who integrated what were deemed controversial issues in the classroom that helped to embolden Fair to incorporate such issues and serve as an advocate in his future career as an educator.

Throughout the memoir, Fair introduces the reader to various students, administrators, teachers, professors, organizations, and locations in which he was able to problematize the status quo; however, he also draws the reader's attention to issues experienced by LGBTQ teachers such as the private/public dualism that can be prevalent in school contexts. In the book, the reader is enmeshed in Fair's life and also accompanies him on his doctoral journey at Georgia State University. While one may anticipate that Fair's experience as a doctoral student and candidate would be without any controversy due to his gay identity, Fair describes how he navigated faculty and staff who were not always open towards his work related to LGBTQ issues in the classroom. Towards the end of the book, Fair brings us closer to the present day and describes the changes that he has observed within the students that he taught. As a beginning teacher in the 1980's, when homophobia was

rampant and LGBTQ-identified students and teachers often obfuscated their identities, Fair illustrates the social change that has taken place within the students as they are more accepting of LGBTQ-identified students and teachers. However, during the final story, titled "Sodomy Laws and Social Acceptance", Fair illuminates that while students are more accepting, it is the adults within the school whom he has to contend with regarding his identity and LGBTQ issues. In the following sections, I provide a brief summary of the various narratives within the text; however, as the book was not divided into chapters, the reader will notice that I have combined the stories rather than listing each separately. Finally, I end this review with my examination of the book.

Gay Issues in My High School, JSU, Oak Grove, and Riverside

Fair commences the memoir by describing how his small town of Weaver, Alabama was not very open towards LGBTQ-identified individuals or issues in the 1970's. Moreover, he illuminates the salient heteronormative gender roles in the local area by stating how it was assumed that boys should not read. With the absence of openly gay or lesbian teachers as role models, Fair recounts how he sought solidarity with those teachers who problematized heteronormativity in their classrooms, such as Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Bryan. As such, both teachers served as role models for Fair who did not have an LGBTQ-identified role model in the classroom, curriculum, school, or town.

Following his journey as a K-12 student, Fair goes on to convey his university experience at Jacksonville State University (JSU). In doing so, he describes his various social activities such as his time in a fraternity; however, as he recounts, his gay identity was not prevalent in his life. Throughout his time as a university student, he notes how the professors were mostly accepting in the education department.

Nevertheless, Fair chronicles his experience of one professor in the department who was not. As Fair narrates, a male professor used a pejorative term for LGBTQ individuals and indicated that he would fail anyone who identified as such. In closing this part, he reflects on his future in which he might have contested such comments by an educator.

After the university experience, Fair chronicles his journey to becoming a teacher in 1986 at Oak Grove High School, a school located outside of Atlanta. In describing Oak Grove, he notes how he was able to split his professional teacher identity and LGBTQ identity, similar to Connell's (2015) discussion of the private/public dichotomy of gay and lesbian teachers, so as to eschew reprisal. In the school, however, he illustrates how he felt solidarity with the Black students who also faced discrimination. After three years, however, Fair describes his move to Riverside High School in the 1990's due to the closure of Oak Grove. In this story, Fair details how Riverside was a 50/50 school; that is, it was split between Black and White students. In reflecting on the problematic environment for teachers, he draws attention to the constant criticism related to favoring one group over another.

Students and Teachers at Riverside, Dryden High School, and Activism

In the subsequent stories from Fair's teaching experience at Riverside following the three years at Oak Grove, he describes the various students that he encountered during his tenure. In these stories, the reader is introduced to Brian, a skinhead who wrote a homophobic paper; Mary, a girl who asked him if he was gay due to trying to understand her own gay parents; Steven, who used a pejorative term towards Fair and had a gay father; and Nevaeh, a student who attempted to elicit information about Fair's sexuality and later became a volunteer at Project Open Hand, which was an "organization that made meals for people with AIDS" (p. 51). In each of the

stories regarding the students, the reader is made aware of various issues, such as the public/private dualism, that Fair experiences as a gay teacher. While Fair describes the experiences with students, he also reflects on his experiences with teachers, such as Mary Bryant. Recounting his experience with Mary Bryant, he describes how he incorrectly assumed that she placed a religious pamphlet in his mailbox as she was religious; however, he later goes on to describe how it was not true. After confronting Mary Bryant, she relays how she would not do such a thing as she had the experience of being the only Black teacher in an all-White school.

Following the suggestion of a teacher at Riverside, June, Fair describes how he became a teacher in 1994 at Dryden High School, which is at the center of his experiences throughout the rest of the book. While June may have perceived Dryden to be more accepting of LGBTQ teachers, Fair recounts how it was not as welcoming. In describing Dryden, he notes how he could face reprisal without cause and takes the reader along his journey in the organization, GLSTN, or the Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Teachers' Network. While attending the GLSTN conference in Philadelphia, however, Fair recounts the normativity present which emphasized that gays and lesbians should take a conservative image to counteract stereotypes. As such, this can be related to homonormativity, which like heteronormativity, privileges monogamy and other ideals similar to heteronormativity (Duggan, 2003). Following the conference, Fair illustrates how it emboldened him to take an activist stance in his local community by creating a chapter of GLSTN in Atlanta.

School Controversies and Georgia State University

Throughout the rest of the book, Fair narrates the various controversies that ensued during his time at Dryden High School. During the 1996-1997 school

year, Fair details the display of racism of the White students towards the Black students in which the White students drove around in a pick-up truck with a confederate flag. Moreover, Fair illuminates the racism that Black students encountered and his attempts to challenge his students' assumptions. In another controversy related to his dissertation research that will be described in the following paragraph, Fair narrates how he observed a subject/verb grammar lesson in his school.

Recounting the lesson, Fair describes the teacher's discussion of how the subject and verb work together like a team; that is, like a family. When discussing the family, however, the heteronormative model was utilized. Moreover, as Fair chronicles, the teacher emphasized how the semicolon is female because it is "gossipy", and the period is male since it keeps to itself. Following the lesson, Fair describes how the teacher approached him about the sexism prevalent in the lesson since she was aware of his research interests, and she indicated that she would not change it. As Fair closes, he reminds us that politics is always already entangled in the lesson.

During his tenure at Dryden, Fair narrates his experiences pursuing a specialist degree and doctoral degree at Georgia State University. While his account suggests that he worked with very open and welcoming professors, he reflects on an instance of homophobia from Dr. Otis Winston. During a class with Dr. Winston on the psychology of the inner-city child, he recounts the classroom discussion of his paper proposal on the difficulties faced by LGBTQ teens. Describing the class discussion where each student offered their topic, Fair reflects on the silence he experienced and reticence towards his topic by Dr. Winston. In the end, Fair decides to go against Dr. Winston's comment that the paper did not align with the class, and instead, Fair decides to pursue the topic as it was central to his interests. Reflecting on the experience, he describes how he made an "A" on the

final paper, but Dr. Winston's note on his paper was homophobic and illustrates how the university can sometimes be a challenging environment for LGBTQ-individuals.

A New Type of Homophobia and a New School

In the final stories of the book towards the 2000's, Fair narrates how he was able to start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at Dryden High School, which was not without controversy. However, the diversity that gay and lesbian teachers brought to Dryden was changing due to the growth in metro Atlanta. As Fair recounts, previously, gay and lesbian teachers commuted to Dryden from Atlanta; however, the increasing traffic caused such teachers not to go to the school. Moreover, Fair illustrates how the school and administration were becoming more conservative. During this time, he reflects on a few incidents with students, such as Sue, who called him a "fairy", with little to no repercussions from the administration. As such, Fair narrates how he had finally demanded that something be done, otherwise, he would sue. Following the conversation with the administrator, Fair describes how the harassment from the student finally dissipated. In this account of his experience, the reader is reminded of the challenging circumstances that LGBTQ teachers may face in contrast to heterosexual teachers.

In the remaining stories, Fair describes the overt and sometimes surreptitious homophobia that he continued to experience at Dryden. Following a change in the administration, he recounts how he received the first negative reviews of his teaching career. Subsequently, he goes on to chronicle his move to Crystal Springs High School where he and other LGBTQ-identified teachers were made to feel like a part of the community. Moreover, in Fair's account, the assistant principal at Crystal Springs was supportive of his efforts to assist a teacher at

Dryden who was experiencing homophobia, which was in contrast to what he experienced from the administration at Dryden during his final years. While at Crystal Springs, Fair also recounts how the administration was supportive in his efforts to combat a teacher's transphobia in which the teacher continued to use the incorrect pronoun for the student. In the final narrative, Fair chronicles the shift in his attitude towards teaching that he encountered at Crystal Springs. As Fair illustrates, the economic and social diversity of the school assisted him in the attitude shift, and he now felt rewarded in his efforts as a teacher who had "finally gone from being the gay teacher to being a teacher who happened to be gay" (p. 272).

Discussion and Critical Reflection

In Fair's memoir, he recounts the multifarious aspects of his journey as a student in K-12 schools in Alabama to his current retirement from K-12 teaching. As the Southeastern United States is often politically and socially conservative (Strunk, 2018), Fair's memoir illustrates the struggles often faced by LGBTQ and other teachers who are of the non-dominant background. Moreover, as Pascoe (2007) and Strunk (2018) described, schools (re) produce heterosexuality as the norm; however, Fair's memoir serves as an encouragement to problematize the status-quo for not only LGBTQ-identified teachers and administrators, but all teachers. Nevertheless, Fair's memoir can be a potential resource for LGBTQ teachers in contexts such as the Southeastern United States and beyond who may encounter homophobia from faculty, students, administration, and parents.

While the memoir illuminates critical issues in relation to this gay teacher's life in the Southeastern

United States, a potential aspect that needs to be problematized is the public/private dualism that is enacted throughout the memoir. Concomitantly, in Connell's (2015) interviews with 45 gay and lesbian teachers, she discussed how they often must obfuscate their sexual identities in schools. Though I do not disagree that teachers in conservative and unwelcoming contexts cannot or may not be able to share their personal lives with students, faculty, parents, and administration, I am reminded of Foucault's (1978) assertion that silence "functions alongside the things said" (p. 97). Thus, while gay and lesbian teachers such as Fair may attempt to hide their sexuality from the aforementioned groups, they cannot be outside of the known/unknown dualism (Sedgwick, 1990) that permeates the discourse of the school; that is, what is said is also what is not said.

Throughout the memoir, Fair's narratives illustrate a transformation in his activist stance as he grappled with problematizing the assumptions of others. While his activism challenged labels in the classroom and beyond, I draw attention to a categorization that was enacted in the writing. Describing the change in the school and community environment of Dryden High School, he said, "The new Dryden community consisted of people who moved from the North for job opportunities" (p. 180). As such, we might be inclined to ask: Where is the North that he describes? How does this label, which enacts an us/them dichotomy, serve to other those who are not from the South? As Fair is part of a marginalized group, it is imperative to be cautious with labels or categorizations as they may reify dichotomies that enact exclusion.

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