A recent exchange in the pages of EJ (April 1992) on self-censorship by teachers in the selection of reading material prompts me to recount a risk-taking adventure from which I have returned to tell the tale.

On a semester's leave recently, I worked with colleagues and preservice teachers in an intensive professional-semester course. We read together Harvey Fierstein's Torch Song Trilogy. For readers unfamiliar with Torch Song, it is a pioneering theater piece - a pre-AIDS glimpse into the familial and love lives of gay men. Arnold, the central character, is a transparent stand-in for the author who actually played the part in both the stage and film versions. He is, by turns, sharp-tongued, vulnerable, nurturant, and love-sick in his dealings with his mother, his lovers, and his adopted son. In examining the play closely, most of the students commented on the universality of the themes it embodied. Arnold's quest for love, for acceptance by his family, for honesty in his relationships were what we all aspire to, regardless of sexual orientation.

The students who had taken responsibility for "teaching" this book filled the chalkboard with questions and issues they elicited from the class. Those jottings represented months of potential discussion material which could have been addressed individually, in small groups, or by the whole class. The frenetic timetable of Pro Sem precluded those possibilities, but the presenters did ask their classmates to consider wearing for a day a pink triangle, the symbol of gay and lesbian solidarity and recording in their journals their own feelings and the reactions of others to this branding. When some students objected to the implicit coercion of being asked to participate in what they saw as a social experiment which violated their privacy, they were given the option of writing about why they chose not to participate.

One student wrote of the anguish of confronting long-suppressed memories of a peer's homosexual advances which had frightened him in his childhood as early as adolescence. Others wrote of coming to identify with the struggles for acceptance of gay friends and family members. But almost universally in journal entries and in final class discussions, students voiced doubts about the utility of studying this book as future teachers. It was one thing to be reading it on a politically correct campus in a group of mature twenty-one-year-olds. It was another to confront literary scenes of anonymous bath-house sex in a public high-school classroom. Convinced as most of them were about the need to introduce students to gay and lesbian issues and literature, getting away with it in a public high school was unimaginable.

They had thrown down the gauntlet. I was determined to use this book in my classes when I returned home to my Houston high school. It occurred to me that not only would this be valuable for my heterosexual students, but that - if statistics are to be trusted - there also would be some in the group who are homosexual or will realize they are in the future. The conspiracy of silence we have all entered into on the subject can only damage their chances of emerging whole from their school years.

In addition to the way Torch Song deals with the emotional lives of its characters, the play's success lies in its innovative structure. Entire scenes are built around dialogues between the on-
stage character and a mute off-stage partner. There is a fugue scene in which conversations between pairs of lovers in different rooms weave around each other like two melodic lines, at times harmonizing and at times producing cacophonous discords. It was the play's structural uniqueness that led me to think that students in creative writing could benefit from studying it. Playwriting was among the genres and forms I intended to introduce, and here was a play which offered an array of interesting techniques to emulate.

Most of the creative-writing students were drawn from the magnet program for gifted students which is embedded within a neighborhood high school serving an almost 100% ghetto population. Two-thirds of the magnet students are minorities. Their politics and social values extend from born-again Christian to the far left. They are more sophisticated and well-read than their non-magnet compatriots, but I had no idea how reading about gay males would play with them. Some of my most depressing days in the classroom have stemmed from discussions of The Women of Brewster Place, which contains two lesbian characters. It is hard to imagine a more homophobic group, convinced as they are that gay males and lesbians are diseased creatures, sub-human and destined for hell. I have not yet found either the courage or the proper vehicle to confront these attitudes head-on.

I prepared the creative-writing students by telling them that we were about to embark on some daring reading on a subject not often addressed in the classroom and that the material might shock or upset them in places. I tried to focus on the structural aspects of the play, but I knew full well that these would quickly be submerged by its characters and subject matter. I assured them that if anyone found the prospect of this reading troubling or thought their parents would have serious objections, I was prepared to make alternative assignments.

Up to this point I have led a charmed teaching life. I have worked under supportive administrators who have never challenged my judgment in the selection of materials.

The coordinator of the magnet program knew about my Torch Song plans, but I did not bother to inform parents directly. It was a risk, but I didn't care to stir needless anxieties. My experience has been that if an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect exists between me and my students, they will find it in their interest to protect all of us from outside attacks in controversial situations. I also believe that there is no subject unapproachable in a classroom - or in a family for that matter - provided it is open to honest discussion in a serious atmosphere.

I asked the students to keep journals as they worked their way through the play. The bulk of entries were direct responses to the text - character analyses, expressions of confusion about the structure of several scenes, delight at the sheer entertainment the play offered:

There is nothing better than a story with real humor. I know people were looking at me like I was crazy for the many times I laughed. I don't care. I like being educated with humor. The writers of my American literature book should have lunch with Harvey Fierstein one day.

For the moment, though, I would like to focus on the way the students reacted to reading about homosexuality and what changes, if any, the play wrought on their understanding of the world beyond school.
First, a small tribute to much-maligned parents, who are often cast as villains in censorship stories, false protectors of their children's long-departed innocence. Imagine my relief on reading this entry by Carla, a vivid young woman whose family emigrated from El Salvador when she was seven:

"One night, while I was reading, my mom walked into my room and asked me what I was reading. I mumbled the title! I didn't know how she was going to react on the topic that I was reading about. The title didn't tell her much about the content of the book, so she asked me what it was about - I took a deep breath and told her that I was reading a play about gay guys. Well, I nearly fell off my bed with astonishment when my mother was approving the book and the teacher. She started telling me that the schools were afraid of teaching subjects of the "real world." Don't get me wrong, my mother and I are very open with each other, but I couldn't help but feel surprised. I guess it was because we had never touched the topic before."

Ariel's entry reflects an even greater openness by enlightened parents, who may represent the true silent majority in our schools. Ariel is a very demure, sensitive Asian American student. This brief glimpse of her mother shattered all my stereotypes of how homosexuality would be approached in that culture:

"I went to Bangkok, Thailand, two summers ago and my mother took me to see this drag-queen show called Alcatraz, and as I read this play, all those memories came flooding back to me. I could almost hear the music in the background and hear the drag queens doing their dance/singing routines" (in Torch Song, Arnold is a drag-queen nightclub performer).

What did the students think about the appropriateness of studying this play in school - at their age? Most did not address this issue directly, choosing instead to dismiss it by discussing Torch Song matter-of-factly, as they did all the other books they had responded to in their journals. But several responded head on.

"There are so many other things that public school students are exposed to. This book seemed to clear up some thoughts for me. It opens up the mind of a homosexual and a bisexual and allows you to peek inside and see beyond the title 'gay'."

"I can't really identify with Arnold because I'm not gay, but I think that it is a great book. One that should be read by exactly this kind of audience. High school students are less likely to condemn the book because it is about gay people. I think adults are less open-minded about the subject of homosexuality. They feel the absolute idea is repulsive simply because they don't understand gays aren't even trying to understand. Adults should read this book, it might open up their thinking a little bit."

Maria, Hispanic and Catholic, was ambivalent and confused enough to articulate two seemingly contradictory views:

"When I read this book I felt like I was doing something wrong because of the sex that was mentioned. I feel uncomfortable reading or seeing movies with this kind of activity."
"I don't think there is anything wrong with studying this book in school. In fact I think it's an excellent idea because instead of getting all the dirty stuff of the reading, we are allowed to examine how it is written. It even makes us think of homosexuality - that these two people actually love each other."

The one dissenting vote on reading this book at all came from Michael, a marvelously independent-minded young man who seemed to take issue with the reading on behalf of others:

"The only thing that bugged me was the very sexual, graphic nature of the piece. It just didn't sit too well when I thought about this being done for a class. Our society is very sexual and shouldn't have to hide that fact, but there is a contingent that might really be offended. I guess I would have picked another book, that's all, but it was good."

The journals were full of indications that reading the play had changed student's perceptions and attitudes. That's not the sole reason for studying literature, but it's certainly an important one.

"Wow! I have never in my life read a book on the topic of homosexuality. Before reading the first page my attitude toward the topic had been blank. I was aware of homosexuals but never thought about it or them."

"I began to see that gay people are exactly like straight people. They love the one they're with, never mind that it is a person of their same sex."

"I know plenty of people who have had the exact same experiences, except in a heterosexual situation . . . In identifying with Arnold this story has helped me understand exactly how similar homosexuals are. I mean I've never really thought they were like aliens or something, but I did think there was something besides their sexual preference that made them different."

"Fierstein did a marvelous job building Arnold and describing his life on a human level . . . that is difficult not to identify with. I came away with a better understanding of homosexual relationships. I'm even a little bit more accepting."

"This play was really the one that made homosexuality seem not like just a bunch of sex, but of feelings and pain. I think it was the only one that dealt with the social problems of homosexuality, which is something I think has to be mentioned. Arnold summed it up for us when he says to his mother " . . . try to imagine the world the other way around. Imagine that every movie, book, magazine, TV show, newspaper, commercial, billboard, told you that you should be homosexual. But you know that you're not and you know that for you this is right . . . " That scenario made me think about it and for the first time I began to really understand how awkward it would be."

"I see now that their relationships are very similar to ours. They feel everything that we do, maybe even more in some cases, like here, since Ed is bisexual. I feel it is bad how people discriminate against gays, because it's their private life and they can do what and how they feel. I wonder how this world would be if being gay would be normal and heterosexuality would be
viewed as a sin. 

"By reading this book I was exposed to a homosexual and I realized that they are people too. They think, feel, and love." 

Finally, this excerpt from Larinda's journal in which the distance between school and text and real life that sometimes seem unbridgeable is erased:

"One of my best friends in the world is homosexual. He has some problems with the fact, inner and outer conflict with his gayness. It's not like having a friendship with a girl at all. Being R's best friend is the closest relationship I've ever had with anyone, including "boyfriends." R and I could talk about anything at all. He isn't as up front with his sexuality as Arnold, but they seem to have a lot of similar qualities . . . I've always listened to and stood by R, but now that I've read this play, I feel like I can relate to him more since I've been through experiences similar to his in a symbolic sense of reading."

Why do we read except to live symbolically all the lives we will never live, to feel compassion for characters who, although they are not us, share with us a common humanity. The empathy reflected in these student journals and in the class discussions that sprang from them confirms the need to put aside our timidity and risk introducing unheard voices to our English classes.

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