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## Thinking Out Loud: on dangerous books, difficult stories, different lives

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## Thinking Out Loud: on dangerous books, difficult stories, different lives

### Abstract

In this keynote address from the 2014 SCLA conference in Columbia, Ed Madden discusses the legislative responses to the use of his book, *Out Loud: The Best of Rainbow Radio*, as the common reading at USC Upstate in the fall of 2013. Along with *Fun Home*, used as a common reading at the College of Charleston, *Out Loud* was attacked by South Carolina legislators who objecting to gay and lesbian subject matter in common reading programs. Madden explores the idea of "dangerous" books.

### Keywords

common reading programs, censorship, gay & lesbian literature

### Cover Page Footnote

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## FEATURED ARTICLE

### Thinking *Out Loud*: On dangerous books, difficult stories, different lives

\*This article was originally presented as the keynote address at SCLA's annual conference, Oct. 22, 2014

By Ed Madden

One year ago this month, I was standing in an auditorium at USC Upstate, talking about the book *Out Loud: The Best of Rainbow Radio*, a collection of essays and stories about being lesbian and gay in South Carolina. It was a packed room, a friendly audience of mostly students who asked mostly useful questions, and afterward several came up to tell me how important it was to them that USC Upstate had chosen the book for their first-year common reading. It was a quiet evening, a quiet event. No protests, no controversy, no outrage.

*But as you know, a lot has happened since then.*

Earlier this spring, Rep. Garry Smith (R-Greenville), led a charge to cut funding and thus “punish” two state universities for assigning gay-themed books. College of Charleston had assigned as a first-year reading *Fun Home*, a graphic novel about a lesbian coming of age, and USC Upstate assigned *Out Loud* to first-year writing classes. Upstate Senators Mike Fair (R-Greenville) and Lee Bright (R-Spartanburg) inevitably piled on, calling for further cuts in state funding to USC Upstate over a small academic symposium on sexuality and demanding the cancellation of a

satirical play included in the conference. Irony-impaired Fair said the play, “How to Be a Lesbian in 10 Days or Less,” was an attempt to “recruit” lesbians. Upstate administrators cancelled the play.

Though they insisted it wasn’t related to the controversies, administrators also closed the Center for Women’s Studies at USC Upstate as the semester ended, then said no it would remain open, then said no they were combining it with other programs, then said it was open but wouldn’t have a director—and its status remains tenuous. In a final compromise, the state legislature restored the cuts, but imposed curricular mandates that the ACLU and the Modern Language Association described as a “leveraging of public funds with the goal of micromanaging curriculum and excluding disfavored ideas.”<sup>1</sup> As a result of all this, the state of South Carolina made national and then even international news as the focus of discussions about censorship, intellectual and academic freedom.

When Thomas Maluck first emailed me last summer, he wrote, “While the case of *Out Loud* . . . involves [universities], I believe that the

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<sup>1</sup> The legislature demanded that both schools spend that same amount of money on teaching founding documents (as if they weren’t?), and further required that students be excused from any assigned readings, lectures, or out-of-classroom activities if they object because of “religious, moral, or cultural beliefs.” On June 13, 2014, the ACLU and MLA joined the National Coalition Against Censorship and other organizations in the statement, “This Compromise Is Not Acceptable: Constitutionally Suspect South Carolina Budget Measure Is An Assault on Academic Freedom” (available online at: <http://ncac.org/update/this-compromise-is-not-acceptable-constitutionally-suspect-south-carolina-budget-measure-is-an-assault-on-academic-freedom>.) Both the SC Library Association and

the American Library Association released statements in March. On March 10, the SC Library Association wrote the South Carolina legislature, opposing both “political interference” and “discrimination against the LGBT community in South Carolina.” Two days later, the American Library Association followed suit, arguing for the importance of academic freedom and “an atmosphere of respect” where “teachers may freely teach and students may freely learn.” The letter further argued, “The proposed financial penalties do nothing to advance learning or education at the targeted institutions. Instead, they appear to endorse the official suppression of certain viewpoints [. . .] at the expense of balance and accuracy.

freedom to read and government punishment of school assignments are of direct interest to everyone working in libraries.” So I want to take a few minutes to think with you about the controversy of *Out Loud*—I’d like to think *Out Loud* with you, you might say—about the stakes of what has happened with this little book this year. I want to tell you a little bit about the background of the book, because thinking about the kinds of stories that legislators were so determined to suppress may tell us something about the kinds of stories that matter. And I would like us to think about the often unspoken questions that insistently threaded these controversies—not who has the power to decide curriculum, or why is South Carolina so frequently on *The Daily Show* and the *Rachel Maddow Show* (though these are questions worth considering)—but the larger questions underlying the book controversies: what makes a book dangerous? whose stories matter? and why?

*This is a dangerous book: Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot.* I regularly teach the play in my Irish literature classes. In fact I was teaching *Waiting for Godot* in March as the South Carolina House decided to “punish” the College of Charleston and USC Upstate for teaching dangerous books. This copy of Beckett I am holding is my one souvenir of the summer of 1980. It was a hot summer. Ronald Reagan was nominated for president, Donna Summer was born again. For me, it was the summer of Boys State and church camp and the Arkansas Governor’s School for gifted kids, at that time a five-week residential program for rising seniors. I was in Language Arts. We read a novel about the Holocaust, a short story about Africa. We discussed existentialism. One day, Hillary Clinton gave a guest lecture on feminism and public policy. I called home, horrified. One

night, I saw two boys from theatre arts kissing. I never told anyone.

My copy of Beckett is marked up, my mother having gone through everything I read that summer at the Governor’s School, circling and underlining bad words and bad things. Some pages still bear the imprint of the paper clips with which she marked the most offensive pages. I try hard to read through her eyes, though I know it’s not possible, try to get a clear sense of the danger in this book for a college-bound kid from an Arkansas farm, that hot summer of Reagan and church camp and two boys kissing outside a campus theatre. I wonder what my mother was thinking as she read through Beckett and Sartre and Solzhenitsyn, underlining curse words, and putting a star beside Vladimir and Estragon’s conversation about the two thieves on the cross, a moment I lingered on last spring in class, asking my students why this scene was important—why it mattered. (I’ll come back to this.)<sup>2</sup>

As library professionals, you are very aware that books can be challenged or removed for any number of reasons, but as the ACLU reminds us, “Books about LGBT [lesbian gay bisexual transgender] people and their families remain one of the biggest targets of censorship in school classrooms and libraries.”<sup>3</sup> In South Carolina, we have seen censorship of lesbian and gay texts in the not-so-distant past. In 1995, a health educator in Union County was put on probation for showing the film *Philadelphia* to her class. She thought the film would help her students develop empathy for people suffering from AIDS or other serious illnesses. Local ministers accused her of “promoting homosexuality.”

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<sup>2</sup> This is difficult to write. I know that my mother cared deeply about my education, and she also thought carefully about what books can do. I don’t want to make light of the diligence and concern she demonstrated. If anything, she made clear to me that books *do* have power.

<sup>3</sup> See Joshua Block, “Banned Books Week 2013: Books about LGBT Families Remain Targets of Censorship,” *ACLU Blog of Rights*, 23 Sept 2013. Online at <https://www.aclu.org/blog/free-speech-lgbt-rights/banned-books-week-2013-books-about-lgbt-families-remain-targets>.

In 2002, Bette Greene's young adult novel *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* was removed from public school libraries in Horry County after months of public debate. Greene based the novel on the true story of the murder of a young gay man by three high school students. Parental complaints about the novel didn't focus on the murder, but on 12 objectionable words and the benign representation of a middle-class gay couple. Objecting, that is, to the very representation of gay men, parents successfully fought to ban a novel that suggests it's not okay to kill gay men. Ironically, at the heart of Greene's novel is a story about a town librarian forced to censor information by the local "Concerned Citizens for a Moral Library." Even more ironic, incoming USC freshmen were reading J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* as their common reading that summer—according to the American Library Association, one of the most challenged books of the 1990s.

Rep. Garry Smith described *Fun Home* as "pornographic" and the use of *Out Loud* as "promotion of a lifestyle."<sup>4</sup> In a fundraising letter he sent out in March, he called both books "pornographic propaganda without any alternative or counter-balancing view." I would argue that those counter-balancing views of sickness, sin, and stigma remain readily available and pervasive in the surrounding culture. Also, either these guys haven't read the books—likely, as no one could call *Out Loud* pornographic—or they think the very representation of homosexuality, the simple visibility of lesbian and gay Carolinians is pornographic.

Let me tell you a little about this "pornographic" book.

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<sup>4</sup> "Promotion of a lifestyle" is language that surely echoes previous attacks on gay-themed literature as "promoting homosexuality."

<sup>5</sup> We also knew that most experts said this was a real underestimate, since many couples living in a hostile climate like South Carolina would be unlikely to out

In August of 2005, an ad began to air on a Columbia radio station, WOIC 1230 AM. "For far too long," the announcer said, "talk radio airwaves have been dominated by the people who talk about gays and lesbians. Starting this fall, they speak for themselves." That summer, as the local Air America station was getting off the ground, a program manager contacted the South Carolina Gay and Lesbian Pride Movement, asking if there might be interest in a gay and lesbian community radio show. The offer was timely. In the 2004 election, 13 states amended their constitutions to ban same sex marriage. Surprisingly, South Carolina wasn't in that first wave of anti-gay legislation, but it would not be far behind. On November 5, 2004, only days after the election, Rep. Gary Simrill told the Rock Hill *Herald* that he already had staffers looking into the amendments that passed and working to draft one for the 2006 South Carolina ballot. By March of 2005, in a bit of anti-gay overkill, the South Carolina legislature was considering nine bills (three of them constitutional amendments), prohibiting marriage, civil unions, and partner and family benefits for same-sex couples.

What struck me and others at the time, as marriage equality increasingly became a topic in South Carolina media, was the overwhelming sense that this was an issue *somewhere else*. We were also struck by the real lack of South Carolina lesbian and gay voices on the issue—as if there were no lesbian and gay couples in South Carolina who might, indeed, support marriage. The issue was elsewhere and other, and there seemed to be no recognition that this legislation would affect real people who live here. Yet we knew from the 2000 census that over 15,000 South Carolinians lived with same-sex partners—and that they lived in every county in the state.<sup>5</sup> The census also told us

themselves on a government survey. One of the unintended effects of these amendments nationwide has been an increase in gay and lesbian voters. A 2006 report from the UCLA Williams Institute found a 30 percent increase in same-gender couples in the United States, with the biggest increases in states that endured

that in the year 2000, South Carolina was fourth in the nation for same-sex couples raising kids. These were real people and real families, but you wouldn't have known this from the South Carolina news media at the time. Where were their voices? Where were *our* voices?<sup>6</sup>

When WOIC offered a spot for a radio show, the SC Gay and Lesbian Pride Movement had been working hard to change the media conversation—town hall meetings around the state, outreach at a state bridal show (if you want to know about that, look up “Gay Bridal Showers” on National Public Radio),<sup>7</sup> and on Feb 12, 2004, and again in 2005, couples applied for marriage licenses at the Richland County Courthouse—a kind of publicity stunt or protest, sure, but one we hoped would reshape media coverage. And that was the point of Rainbow Radio: to put South Carolina lesbian and gay voices into the mainstream media and put South Carolina faces on these issues. The weekly radio show had 10 minutes of news, 20 minutes of interview, and 10 minutes at the end for a short personal essay or commentary. The broadcast footprint was small, but we soon moved to online podcasts to extend the reach of the show.

In 2009, I decided to put together a book collection of essays from the show. I thought so many of them were good, and I really wanted them to have an impact beyond a 30 minute broadcast or a web archive. It was a difficult

task, with over 100 commentaries to consider. I had four primary criteria: (1) I wanted good writing, (2) I wanted a range of voices to represent the diversity and demographics of the community, and (3) I wanted to document historical moments—the first Pride march, for example, or the first outreach at the State Fair. Warren Gress of the Alliance for Full Acceptance in Charleston has said this book is the first oral history of the state's lesbian and gay community. Also, (4) I wanted essays connected to contemporary issues, such as marriage, but with a focus on personal experience rather than polemic or advocacy pieces.

And from the outset, I knew that I wanted to start with Tommy Gordon's essay, “My Uncle Greg Is Gay.” It's an essay by a 14-year-old boy about his gay uncle, about stereotypes and about how knowing someone can break down those stereotypes. In that way it illustrates the “contact hypothesis,” a fundamental principle of social psychology: that under the right conditions, contact between members of majority and minority groups can reduce prejudice against the minority. This has become a principle of gay and lesbian organizing: that people who know someone that is gay or lesbian are more likely to oppose discrimination. But it's not just that they *know* them or have *contact* with them: it's that they *talk*, they tell their stories.<sup>8</sup>

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amendment battles. That is, more couples and families came out, and more became politically active.

<sup>6</sup> That same fall, 2004, the Rock Hill newspaper reported that at a Fort Mill high school principal removed gay marriage as a topic for planned student debates (modeled on the presidential debates), suggesting that questions of voice—who is allowed to speak and who is silenced, whose voice counts and whose does not, what we can talk about and what we can't—was a pervasive issue in this state.

<sup>7</sup> “Gay Bridal Showers” aired on National Public Radio's All Things Considered on March 29, 2004. Online at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1800343>.

<sup>8</sup> In a foundational 1996 study by Gregory Herek and John Capitanio, they found that “Direct disclosure of one's homosexuality—talking about it openly—appears to play an important role in changing attitudes.” See Herek, G.M. and Capitanio, J.P., “Some of my best friends’: Intergroup contact, concealable stigma, and heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 22.4 (1996): 412-424. That change will not be sudden, coming out can still be risky, and as a more recent study of South Carolina has found, an overwhelmingly hostile climate hampers the possibility for attitude change, especially on the part of family members. On this point, see Barth, Jay; Overby, L. Marvin; and Huffmon, Scott H., “Community Context, Personal Contact, and Support for an Anti-Gay Rights

As I close, let me offer a few final thoughts. First, the idea that stories matter, that lesbian and gay voices matter, is at the heart of *Out Loud*. When we talk about LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] issues in this state, we should hear lesbian and gay and bisexual and transgender voices. One of the most important things we can do to change our culture is to tell our stories. As my co-editor, Candace Chellew-Hodge, and I put the book together, we had in mind the importance of telling stories, and the relation of storytelling to empathy, that fundamental bridge for accepting the humanity of someone else. Telling stories matters because when I listen to your story, I not only feel *with* you and *for* you, I have to make decisions about how to treat you. And your story may, indeed, become part of my story, part of how I understand the world.

Second, in 2013 and 2014, to ask college students to think about the lives of gay and lesbian people should not be controversial; it is to ask them to join a public conversation already underway. Throughout this year, marriage equality has been in the news. If ever there were a moment when it might be important to understand the lives of your gay and lesbian neighbors, it is now. This book is *relevant*. As I know from my own years serving on and chairing the first-year reading book selection committee at USC in Columbia, *relevance* is one of the key criteria for book selection—relevance to students, relevance to curricular initiatives, relevance to the culture. (On relevance to students, I would point out that almost a third of the essays in *Out Loud* were by and about the experiences of South Carolina college students.) By choosing readings that were *relevant* in some way, we

wanted to make it clear that what happens in the classroom matters beyond the classroom, that a college education is about becoming an engaged citizen. Whatever the issue, in a diverse world, we have to learn to talk with reason and empathy about difficult things.

That said, let's be careful about immediately leaping to an argument about academic freedom, and let's linger for a while on the importance of lesbian and gay stories. Lesbian and gay lives are valuable in themselves, *not* because they represent an abstract freedom to discuss difficult or controversial issues. As Lisa Johnson, the director of Women's and Gender Studies at USC Upstate said in a recent forum, immediately going to an argument about academic freedom leaves in place the idea that gay and lesbian lives are objectionable, controversial, icky.<sup>9</sup> Further, let's recognize that this is more than just a philosophical debate. When gay and lesbian texts are censored, this only ratifies the shame and stigma already circulating in the culture. Censorship confirms for every gay and lesbian and transgender student—and every student with same-sex parents—that there is something about their lives that should not be spoken, should not be in a textbook, should not be on the stage. It makes their lives—and their *possible* lives—invisible in their immediate lived world.

Finally, let's continue to think—and think hard—about why and how books are dangerous. In the scene my mother starred in Beckett, the exchange about the two thieves on the cross, Vladimir tells Estragon that even though there are four versions of the story of the thieves on the cross, everyone believes only

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Referendum," *Political Research Quarterly* 62.2 (June 2009): 355-365.

<sup>9</sup> From Lisa Johnson's paper, "Lez Be Honest: Queer Feelings about Women's Studies at a Public Regional University in the Southeastern United States," presented as the keynote at the 2015 USC Women's & Gender Studies Affiliate Faculty Retreat (Sept. 26, 2014). "When we too quickly shift from the substance of the conflict over whether sexual orientation should be taught to

incoming freshmen to a meta-argument about academic freedom," Johnson said, "we skip the work of interrogating assumptions that there is something distasteful about LGBT subject matter." On this argument, Johnson cites Miranda Joseph's "Analogy and Complicity: Women's Studies, Lesbian/Gay Studies, and Capitalism," from *Women's Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*, ed. by Robin Wiegman, Duke University Press, 2002: 267-292.

one version. Why, asks Estragon? "It's the only version they know." Books help us to imagine what someone else's experience might be like, other versions, other ways of living and knowing. As my niece Mahayla wrote in the final paper for her first-year composition class at Midlands Tech this spring: reading helps us to understand people who are different from us, it helps us to develop our imagination and our empathy.

Books can be dangerous, yes, if you want to keep worldviews narrow, horizons limited, minds closed, bigotry unchallenged, and difference at bay. Books are dangerous, that is, if you want your version of the world to be the only one that matters.

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