YouTube Script – June 2023

*All Boys Aren’t Blue* (George M. Johnson)

Hello and welcome to the Underground Bookshelf YouTube Channel! If you’re watching this video, you’ve found the very first episode! Underground Bookshelf is an online platform that celebrates diverse perspectives in literature. The goal of this platform is to enable minorities, women, queer folks, and people with disabilities to see themselves reflected in the art/ media they consume. A new short story or resource is posted every week. The stories and resources on this website are free. They will always be free because everyone deserves to have access to stories that reflect them and their experiences. You can find the link to the website and the social handles below. For accessibility reasons, I also uploaded this script to the Underground Bookshelf website, so if you would like to read along, or would just rather read instead of watch, you can find it there.

My name is Laura Browne-Lambert. I am a queer, neurodivergent writer, and I have a functional neurological disorder that was triggered by COVID. I mention these things because they are an important part of who I am and how I experience the world. I don’t hold back from including them in the things I write about because I didn’t find enough characters like me in the books I read growing up and I still don’t now. And I want to be part of changing that for the next generation of readers. You can find my first book on Amazon. It’s called, *The Wood*, and it is a coming-of-age book about a girl who is exiled from her community for what is believed to be witchcraft. It has themes like identity, self-acceptance, accessibility, and found family. I’ll put the link below in case you’re interested.

And now, let’s talk about our subject for today’s video: *All Boys Aren’t Blue* by George M. Johnson. This is a young adult memoir which means that it is a nonfiction book about the experiences of the author. In case you don’t know, the main difference between memoirs and autobiographies is that autobiographers are telling the story of their life from their birth to the moment in they are writing the book. In contrast, memoirs are a collection of memories that are held together by certain themes that the author wants to highlight. They usually have some sort of message they want to share with audiences by sharing those memories.

In the case of *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, Johnson tells stories that illustrate his experiences growing up Black and queer. According to the American Library Association, *All Boys Aren’t Blue* was the second-most frequently banned or challenged book of 2022 at 86 challenges. It was challenged for it’s LGBTQ+ content and for discussions of sexual situations. Challenges are the first step toward banning a book. People in the community challenge a book by bringing it before a local governing body with an argument for why it should not be accessible to potential readers. If the school board or city or county government agrees with the challenger, they typically enact a book ban.

Book challengers and the governing bodies that ban books often cite protecting youth as a key factor in banning books, but books with LGBTQ content or discussions about Race tend to be frequent targets of book bans and challenges. We’ll dive deeper into the history, psychology, and impact of book bans in another video, but for now, let’s focus on this particular book and the author’s feelings about the bans impacting their book.

Before moving forward, I’ll just mention that this book does mention various forms of trauma, including sexual trauma. We won’t go into detail on Johnson’s experiences, but I think it’s important to note in case you’re not in a space where you want to think on this topic. I’ll make a note when we are about to start this section so that you can skip forward if you need to.

In a 2022 story by NPR, Johnson indicates that they feel book bans are an attempt to silence conversations around diverse experiences. In the article, they are quoted as saying:

"Any time you write a book where you write about your truth, there are going to be people who want to silence that truth."

They go on to point out that American school systems focus on a curriculum that centers a white, straight perspective. They say:

"The curriculum that is being taught in most school systems is still heavily geared towards the straight, white, male teen," Johnson says. "And so when we now have the ability to put books into curriculum that tell other stories, that tell stories that are non-white, that tell stories that are non-heterosexual, they're trying to take them out across the board because, you know, it's like, 'Oh, my God, how dangerous would it be if young white teens had to actually learn about the other people who exist in society with them?'"

This is a topic that Johnson discusses throughout the book. In fact, one of the main purposes of *All Boys Aren’t Blue* is to center a perspective that many people don’t see reflected in literature, television, film, or the classroom – specifically, a queer, Black perspective.

As an aside, I should note that in the NPR article, Johnson is noted to now use they/them pronouns, so that is what I will use in this video. However, in their book, which was written a couple years earlier, they referred to themself using he/him pronouns. So if you’ve read their book or are going to read it, you’ll notice that difference.

Okay, now, just as a word of warning, we are about to delve into several themes that recur throughout the book, which means there is risk of spoilers from this point. I’ll try to keep things at a high enough level that I won’t ruin the experience of reading this book for yourself, but I can’t promise not to mention examples of the themes we are about to discuss.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Johnson goes into great detail illustrating their own experiences navigating their own identity as it relates to their gender, sexuality, and race, but they also discuss the ways that the people around them interact with their identity. This is a really important conversation to have, especially at the age that Johnson is writing for: teens. When we talk about diversity in formal settings like school or work, we tend to break it down into separate groups. We talk about the experiences of women separate from the Black experience and we talk about queer identities separate from ethnicity, and gender separate from ability and so on. While Johnson strictly talks about growing up as a queer, masculine-presenting Black person, they talk about something that’s key to all kinds of intersectional identities. All these things like our skin color, gender, sexual orientation, religion, abilities, and so forth come together to make up a whole person, but it’s hard to feel like a whole person when you can’t bring your whole self to school, to work, to your friendships, or even home with you at the end of the day.

In *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, Johnson focuses on the experience of being unable to bring their queerness with them as they navigate their Black community and being unable to bring their Blackness with them when they attend a white school. They even talk about feeling like they can’t bring their masculinity with them into their queer identity. Johnson’s book is a really great example about why it is important to recognize the whole person and to make space for people who are multiply marginalized to just be themselves and feel that every part of them valued, appreciated, and supported by the people around them and the society at large.

FAMILY

Family is a recurring theme throughout *All Boys Aren’t Blue*. Johnson discusses the successes and failures his nuclear family makes as his parents, grandmother, siblings, and cousins try to support and protect a queer child without openly addressing how and why Johnson’s experience is different from many of their family members. They also touch on the examples that people in their extended family gave for what queer, Black folks can look like. By doing so, they paved the way for Johnson to experience gentler parenting when it came to their identity. Their third example of family is found family. Johnson introduces readers to the friends that become more like siblings, some of whom share Johnson’s intersecting identities, Black and queer, which helps Johnson grow into their identity with more confidence.

Ultimately, Johnson relays the message that you should find your people, whether those people come from the family that raised you, from extended relations, or from friendships and connections you build along the way. Building your network of support is important, especially for multiply marginalized people who are more likely to struggle to find people who can relate to every part of their identity.

TRAUMA

In *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, Johnson discusses several types of traumas they have experienced. They open with a story about physical trauma that resulted from getting attacked by several boys on the way home from school. The attack results in dental damage and even though Johnson’s adult teeth replace the baby teeth they lost, Johnson maintains difficult feelings about smiling for many years.

They also discuss the trauma caused by name-calling and bullying, specifically around the use of the F-word. Even before understanding the meaning of the word, Johnson understood the negative connotations around the word and that the word was directed at them instead of other children for a reason. Bullying in the schoolyard and silence at home made it clear that there was something about Johnson that made him different in a way that was dangerous. The author carried fear caused by that trauma into adulthood and it impacted their journey around coming out, living openly, finding friendships, and pursuing intimate relationships.

There are a few forms of sexual trauma discussed in *All Boys Aren’t Blue*. The first type is, in a way, a collective trauma experienced to varying degrees by the queer community, especially the Black gay and transgender communities. The AIDS epidemic continues to impact these communities, and there is still stigma around HIV. There’s also an expectation that if you are Black and gay or transgender that you will eventually contract this virus and die. It’s one of the reasons that some people see this intersection as a death sentence of sorts. Even if you don’t contract the virus, the weight of this trauma is a lot to carry. Before we move on, I think it’s important to mention that people living with HIV or AIDS are whole and valuable members of our community and having this virus does not in any way make you a bad person. You deserve to have love and compassion and human connection and you belong just as much as anyone else. People with HIV can live good lives and there are interventions today that can help prevent infection and sustain the lives of people with HIV.

The second form of sexual trauma that Johnson brings up is sexual abuse. I won’t go into graphic detail, but Johnson talks about their first sexual encounters. In one of them, they are abused by someone close to them, in another, they are touched inappropriately by someone they don’t know very well. Their discussion of this type of trauma revolves around consent, empowering victims of abuse to come forward and to name their abusers, and Johnson’s journey to forgiveness.

The third form of sexual trauma that Johnson discusses is an experience with painful sex. This moment illustrates something that Johnson indicates at various points throughout the book: that a lack of open dialogue around queerness hurts queer folks. There are ways to enjoy queer sex without causing harm, but if we don’t talk about it, we can’t prepare queer folks for healthy sexual relationships that we do for our straight, cisgender counterparts. As a society, we suppress these conversations when we censor LGBTQ+ media, prohibit the inclusion of queer identities and bodies in sex ed, and even when we create environments at home, school, and our communities in which queer folks do not feel safe enough to ask questions or live openly as themselves. A lack of knowledge about safe and healthy sex, consent, and intimate relationships are very real impacts of the suppression that LGBTQ+ people face.

REPRESENTATION

So far, we’ve talked about intersectionality, family, and trauma, and while this book talks about many more things like identity, self-acceptance, politics and more, you’ll have to explore those ideas by reading the book itself. The last theme I want to cover in this video is representation. In *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, Johnson talks about all the ways that they missed out on representation and what that meant for them growing up. Without strong queer representation in media, classrooms, home, and community, Johnson struggled to accept their identity and existed in an environment in which it was unsafe to be themselves. If they and their peers had better LGBTQ+ representation, Johnson and others like them may have faced less bullying and harassment and may have had the tools they needed to build self-esteem and personal power when they needed it and may have had the opportunity to learn how to build healthy relationships with intimate partners. If the school-age children Johnson grew up with had curriculums that incorporated the experiences of Black Americans, Johnson and others might not have had to deal with as many microaggressions from the White students around them.

This is something that Johnson does really well: talk about the problems around lack of representation while offering an example of good representation for their own Black, queer experience. While no one is a monolith and not all Black, queer, masculine-presenting folks will have the same experience as Johnson, their experience is a great, non-fiction example that readers of all backgrounds can grow from. *All Boys Aren’t Blue* does what representation is meant to: it makes people with a similar identity or life experience feel seen and understood, while giving other people a glimpse at another world view – and it makes sure that we, as readers, recognize the diversity all around us.

If you’ve made it to this point in the video and you’re interested in reading this book it’s important to mention that there are a few content warnings. In *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, you’ll find use of slurs, sexual abuse, sexual encounters, death, and bullying. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t read the book. I mention this in case you personally aren’t in the headspace to read this kind of content. Johnson approaches each of these topics in a mature and thoughtful way, but it’s important for you as a reader to take these things into consideration when picking a book to read.

In case it wasn’t already clear, *All Boys Aren’t Blue* is a piece of nonfiction geared toward young adult readers. I’ve copied links to where you can find this book in case you are interested in reading it for yourself. I’ve also copied my resources in case you would like to learn more. Thank you so much for going on this journey with me. Other things you can find in the description include the link to read the script from this video, the link to the Underground Bookshelf website and the link to my new book. You can also find the link to the Underground Bookshelf patreon if you would like to support this project. You can be a Patron for $3 a month and patrons get an extra short story every month as a thank you. You can also support the project by picking up apparel from the merch store. The link for that is in the description as well. Of course, you can support this project for free by liking and subscribing, by following Underground Bookshelf on social media, reading the stories and using the resources on the website or by submitting your own short stories to be included in our collection.

Before signing off, my question for the comments is: What are some good examples of Black, queer representation in literature, film, television, or the arts that you would like to share? Thanks for watching this video. I hope you read and enjoy All Boys Aren’t Blue by George M. Johnson, and wherever you are, when you’re here in the Underground Bookshelf space, YOU BELONG.

Works Cited

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Johnson, G.M. (no date) Books, GMJ. Available at: <https://iamgmjohnson.com/book-2/> (Accessed: 23 June 2023).

Links

George M. Johnson’s Website: <https://iamgmjohnson.com/>

Fierce Reeds (online library): <https://www.fiercereads.com/wp-content/uploads/documents/All_Boys_Arent_Blue_Excerpt.pdf>

WorldCat (to search for this book near you): <https://worldcat.org/title/1098231312>

Where to buy: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07YRL9DCW/ref=dbs_a_def_rwt_hsch_vapi_tkin_p1_i0>

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