

## Interview with [Robin Reardon](#)

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**Thanks for joining us on Michele 'n Jeff Reviews. It's an honor to feature you and your talent on our site. Can you please share with us a little bit of your background, such as where you came from, how you began writing, and what led you to write gay-themed stories?**

Perhaps the single most influential aspect to my background, in terms of my writing, is that I was always a bit of an outsider. My family moved frequently for no apparent reason, and although I learned to adapt well, the concept of belonging anywhere was more elusive. Eventually I learned to value the perspective a person on the outside can have that isn't as visible to someone on the inside of a social clique, a community, or society in general.

A number of people have asked me why I write novels with a homosexual focus. For one thing, I hate injustice. While there are other groups of people I could write about who are treated unjustly, the cognitive disconnect I see around the issue of homosexuality is both fascinating and infuriating to me. Science is coming up with proof after proof that this orientation is a normal, naturally occurring phenomenon—not just in people, either, but in many, many different animal species. So the disconnect is coming from someplace outside of reason. Outside of reality. Which puts it into fascinating areas, irresistible to an author: psychology, social conditioning, religious extremism—juicy territory.

**All three of your novels deal with topics that relate to the reconciliation of religious beliefs with sexual orientation. Is there a reason why this particular topic is significant to you?**

The easy answer is that I've always been fascinated by comparative religion. But that was just a jumping off place.

There is no rational reason to condemn or disparage homosexuality. This leaves homophobes pointing either to their irrational gut reactions or to their scripture or both. The gut reaction is a brainless, thoughtless one and can be understood at that level. But the scriptural justification believes itself to be safe from this assessment; in addition, religion neither requires nor provides proof of anything. It's based on faith, not reality. This is not a criticism, but it does mean that rational argument will have little or no influence over a religious belief.

My second book, [THINKING STRAIGHT](#), was inspired by the real-life story of Zack Stark, whose parents put him into an "ex-gay" camp in 2005. What I saw was this normal teen who happened to be gay, trying to understand why his God would create him in a form that God couldn't love. What is he supposed to do with that?

I've never met anyone who doesn't cherry-pick from whatever scripture they follow, rejecting the thou-shalts and the thou-shalt-nots that don't make sense to them. Usually this is done without much thought as to why. In fact, it should be done—but strategically, not hit-or-miss. For Christians, Jesus himself provides the touchstone in Matthew (22:37-40); paraphrasing: “Everything you do should support love. If it doesn't, get rid of it.” And he proceeded to lead by example, rejecting many of the supposedly sacred laws of his own religion. I believe that approaching religion strategically, as Jesus does here, is the only way to understand which tactics (that is, which laws) will support the objective of love. And that's how I approach it in my writing.

The religious theme is reasonably evident in my first book, [A SECRET EDGE](#), and of course it's the primary focus of THINKING STRAIGHT. In [A QUESTION OF MANHOOD](#), the theme of Christianity is less obvious and less directly related to homosexuality. In this book, the idea of turning everything over to Jesus is shown for what it is: something that's appropriate for dogs, perhaps, but not for people. The expression, “Pray like hell, but row away from the rocks,” comes to mind. It's not enough just to pray; we have to use our brains, as well, or we're denying our own humanity.

My goal in writing is to foster understanding and acceptance. The easy part is to use reason. The harder route is to use religion. It's a great writing challenge. And as you'll see in my fourth book next summer (THE EVOLUTION OF ETHAN POE), this theme will continue.

**The protagonists in your stories are all young men—teenagers—do you write these young adult novels with a youthful target audience in mind? What kind of feedback do you receive from the young people who have read your work?**

Several years ago, after working one-on-one with an independent editor on my general writing skills, I realized that I enjoyed writing the most when I could be a little melodramatic, the way many teens are. You know how they move back and forth quickly between being very intense and very “whatever”? This is my natural fiction voice.

Also, I liked the idea that I might be able to give gay teens some positive stories that have some hope in them. It's a tough age for anyone, and even more challenging for gay kids. Recently I saw a statistic that said about a third of teen suicides are gay teens. While I can't tell you that my writing has helped prevent some of these tragedies, I hope it has at least given the teenagers pause—and sometimes that's enough.

I receive lots of emails from teens. Many of them are heart-wrenching. It's incredibly gratifying to have so many of them tell me that my stories give them something to hold onto, something to think about—and, as some have put it, even something to use in their own defense.

## **Have you found that there are particular challenges in writing stories about teens?**

Technology. Teens are not just early adopters, they're on the bleeding edge. To get a book into the fiction market takes at least eighteen months, and more like two years, from when I start to write. That's an eternity when it comes to teens using technology—partly because it's an eternity to a teenager. The Internet is going to be a constant, but the technology using it changes all the time. So I try to limit dependence on specific technology.

## **Becoming a published author is quite an accomplishment in its own right, but Kensington is most impressive. Can you share with us the process you went through to submit your first manuscript? What was it about the story that caught their eye?**

There are incredibly brave, intrepid authors out there who manage to get published without the benefit of an agent. I did not want to go that route. It took me a long time to find a good agent, and he had connections with Kensington. In sum, it took almost a year to find the agent, and only six weeks to sell both *A SECRET EDGE*, which was finished, and *THINKING STRAIGHT*, which was not much more than a twinkle in my proverbial eye.

For anyone interested in getting fiction published, other than having a good agent my advice is to make sure you are crystal clear on your audience, write for that audience, and then make sure your manuscript is as absolutely, positively perfect as it can be before you approach agents or publishers. The way the fiction publishing industry works today, few publishers have the resources to spend time coaching an author; the closer your work is to print-ready, the more likely you are to sell it.

## **Have you begun any future projects? What do we have to look forward to?**

Next summer, Kensington will release *THE EVOLUTION OF ETHAN POE*. This book was inspired by the real-life story of the town of Dover, Pennsylvania, and what they went through when the school committee decided to include Intelligent Design in high school science classes. Dover is a place where lots of people know lots of people, and this conflict tore the community apart. So here we have dogma vs. Darwin—religion vs. science—yet again. The gay teen at the center of my story wants nothing more than to avoid involvement, and although he's not religious himself, he is close to many who are. So as he learns how science supports who he is and religious dogma irrationality condemns it, he seeks balance between the two. He finds that and more. It was great fun to write, full of unusual concepts—tattoos, power animals, psychic energy.

I don't yet have a release date for another project I'm working on, but I can say that Cherokee Publishing asked me, along with three other authors, to contribute to an anthology of four stories about teens: one gay (the one I'm writing), one lesbian, one bisexual, and one transgender. It will be called *AWAKE*. All proceeds will benefit [The](#)

[Trevor Project](#), a non-profit organization dedicated to suicide prevention among LGBTQ youth.

**Do you write full time or do you have a day job as well?**

By day, I work as a communications manager for an international financial institution. That might sound boring, but consider this: it's another chance to use writing to promote understanding and inclusion, and to help others do the same.

**On all three of your book covers, the central character is depicted, yet none of them shows a frontal facial view. Is this deliberate on your part? How much input are you afforded by your publisher when it comes to cover selection?**

Kensington does a great job of developing an image for each of their authors. Although I had no say whatsoever with the choice for any of my cover art, I can't imagine that I could have done better. Although I want my stories to be realistic (which means, being about teenage boys, there's some sex in there), they are not about sex. Using shots of real boys and not showing their faces instills a subtle seduction into the shot, intriguing readers to want to know more. I've liked all the covers so far, but especially *A QUESTION OF MANHOOD*; the main character goes through a rebellious, almost delinquent phase. The boy on the cover is using one hand to hold one finger of the other... and guess which finger it is.

**Can you tell us a bit about each of your three novels, perhaps a brief synopsis, and share anything of importance you would like readers to know prior to selecting these stories as their next read?**

On the surface, [A SECRET EDGE](#) is a sweet, romantic story about two boys falling in love, one of whom comes out to himself and to others at the same time. But in watching the boys get to know each other, readers will encounter the concepts of Hinduism (and how the ancient Vedic tradition viewed homosexuality) and a tiny bit about how it differs from Buddhism and from Christianity. They will also come to see how the teachings of the pacifist Gandhi acknowledge the occasional necessity of non-peaceful response to violence—something that the Indian boy in the story hadn't considered in his devotion to the peaceful activist.

I mention above the inspiration for [THINKING STRAIGHT](#). It's an engaging story in its own right, but the most important thing I want readers to get is that Christianity is supposed to be about love, and anything that doesn't support and promote love is not following the example of Jesus of Nazareth. So someone carrying a sign that reads, "God hates fags" is actually sinning themselves, no matter how many Bible verses they quote. These verses were written in a time when everyone in the Middle East believed that all human life came from male ejaculate, and the mother contributed nothing. When you think what this means—that any man who spilled his seed outside of a female, a human oven, was killing someone—then of course they condemned any action (like masturbation, for example) that didn't at least plant the seed in the "right" place. Even if

Jesus had known this was nonsense, if he had said that to his followers they would have seen him as insane, and his mission would have failed. So for the religious among us, it's up to them, now, to use the brains God gave them, and understand the "why" of the thou-shalt/shalt-not laws. It isn't not murdering someone that's absolute; it's loving them too much to murder them.

In [A QUESTION OF MANHOOD](#), I wanted to use a straight protagonist who learns about homosexuality, rather than a gay kid who learns about himself. I think it's always a good idea, when we can, to see things from another viewpoint; it helps us figure out how to present ours. And the idea that leadership, manhood, could be demonstrated by a gay boy in a way that a confused and troubled straight boy could learn about them, seemed like a refreshing story line. I use dogs, and dog behavior, because dogs are straightforward in how they expect and demonstrate leadership—and because they are so easily led astray by a leader who uses pack mentality to lead them down the wrong path. So this story, which takes place in the 1970s, is not intended to demonstrate the way gay people should be treated as much as to demonstrate how all people should be treated: They should be treated as who they are, not as we want them to be.

**Tackling religious issues is quite a brave endeavor. Certainly it leaves you wide open for criticism from both religious and non-religious readers/reviewers. Do you at times feel as if you have to have awfully broad shoulders to endure some of these criticisms?**

No one can point to anything in any of my books that speaks against religion in general or Christianity in particular. I don't deny (or support, in any specific way) the sanctity of the Bible; I merely stress the importance of understanding it more deeply than mere reading of the verses would allow.

One reader in Salt Lake City was troubled by the character sketch Jason wrote in *A SECRET EDGE*, in which he saw Jesus as a man capable of being manipulated and getting confused. If that was enough to upset a reader, that reader should stay away from all my stories.

I've received more criticism, more resistance, in this area when I've participated in online blogs (two examples are Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and the blog areas of Amazon). The commenters don't necessarily even know about my books, they just know that my comments challenge their willful blindness. Here's the essence of these conversations. I ask, what's the Bible? They reply, the inerrant, immutable, divine Word of God. I ask, how do you know? They reply, the Bible says so. And they don't appreciate it when I point out the fallacious, circular "logic" of this response.

Faith is something we use to bridge the gap between what we can prove and what we believe. A religion is a system for applying faith. And there is more than one way, one system, to bridge that gap. I want people to think. I expect it.

**Oftentimes readers of gay fiction and mm romance are not particularly attracted to coming out novels. Many say they are no longer relevant because society has progressed beyond the need for these types of messages. Can you share your thoughts on these attitudes and explain why you still deal with coming-of-age and coming out issues?**

I would not describe any story I've written since *A SECRET EDGE* as a true coming-out story. In any case, there may be areas of society in which the coming-out story is old hat; I'm not gay, so my personal experience doesn't allow me to say things are okay for gays anywhere. But I know that there are areas of society where life is still hell for gays. I just learned about the early retirement of Bishop Gene Robinson, who has endured death threats and immense stress, and who wore a bullet-proof vest to the religious ceremony that declared him Bishop. There are people like Sally Kern who declare on a public stage that homosexuality is a greater threat than terrorism. And there are gay teens killing themselves all across our country because of the pain inflicted on them by the unaccepting, the narrow-minded, the willfully ignorant around them.

Whether or not we need coming-out stories, there is still a crying need for stories that let kids know they're okay, that it will get better, and that their destiny does not have to be completely dictated by their sexual orientation. And we need to stop believing that tolerance is enough. Who wants to be tolerated? Acceptance must be the goal.

**Can you please share with us your contact information? Do you have a website, Facebook, or Twitter address you would like to share?**

All my writing time is dedicated to my stories; because I have a day job, I won't have time to write if I also blog and/or tweet. I do have a Facebook page, and I'm happy to receive friend requests. Occasionally, on my Wall I'll link to a news story I think readers would want to know about.

On my website, <http://www.robinreardon.com/>, on the Resources page there is a link to my work, "The Case for Acceptance: An Open Letter to Humanity." This is a pdf file, free for anyone to read/download/whatever, that uses reason, logic, science, and religious examination to demonstrate that the only thing wrong with being gay is how some people treat you when they find out. In this Letter you will see what drives me to write the stories I do.