

A Conversation with Alex Sanchez: GALE's 2022 JALT Conference Featured Speaker

**Interview by Kristie Collins
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Alex Sanchez is the critically acclaimed author of ten teen and adult novels including *So Hard to Say* (2004) and 2001's coming of age story, *Rainbow Boys*. He won the LGBTQA Lambda Award in that year, among a number of awards with 2009's *Bait* winning the 2011 Tomas Rivera Mexican American Book Award as well. Alex's graphic novel from DC Comics, *You Brought Me the Ocean* (2020), was illustrated by transgender and non-binary artist, Julie Maroh. His latest book, *The Greatest Superpower*, came out in 2021. Alex currently lives in Rochester, New York, as a faculty member of the Vermont College of Fine Arts and also enjoys teaching Creative Writing for the University of Chicago.



As GALE's Featured Speaker at the JALT 2022 Conference, Alex gave a talk on *Promoting Inclusiveness Through LGBTQ Texts* and a workshop on *Learning From LGBTQ Students to Become Authentic Educators*.

Content warning: This interview contains references to sexual abuse and homophobia which some readers may find distressing.

K: So, what inspired you to write young adult literature for LGBTQ+ readers?

A: Well, when I first got serious about writing, which was in the early nineties, I didn't set out to write YA (Young Adult), you know, I just loved to read books, period—including YA—and books for adults. So, it was actually my agent who said she'd like to take it to the YA publishing house. And I was like, "Well, I love YA, but I don't want my books to be limited to that..." So, when I wrote *Rainbow Boys*, my first novel, I was just writing with my heart, I was not thinking of a particular audience.

K: Right.

A: But she was the one who was like, "Well, that's what I'd like to do, and if you want to sign with me, that would be my plan." Then she was like, "Well, if you want to think about it..." so, I went back to my friends, and they're like, "Well hey, she's this hot shot New York agent," [laughter] "and she's willing to take it on, and she works with big publishers, so go for it!" I also asked, "Are there any opportunities for a crossover?" and she's like, "Well, publishers usually don't do that."

But then my first phone call with the editor, they're like "We want to market this to both adults and teens!"

K: Wow—that's so great! Do you know your readership... like who is reading your books?

A: My biggest audience is straight teenage girls.

K: No way! Wow, that's fascinating!

A: Yeah! And it makes sense that girls were the ones—especially in the early aughts, the late-nineties—they were the ones driving the gay/straight alliances, and they have gay and lesbian friends, and relatives, and parents, and this was a big social justice issue, so it makes sense. In fact, when my publisher took it on—because they saw it as groundbreaking—they were concerned whether there would be enough readership, if they were going to make any money off of it, because LGBT teens, especially back then, would have accounted for a small readership. So, we never accounted for all these straight teenage girls who would be out reading it.

K: That's so great!

A: Yeah, and I got so many emails from them, and when I go to speak at schools, like they're the cheerleaders, in the front rows. They love reading about gay boys!

K: That's so interesting... So, how did your own identity as an LGTQIA+ person—and as an immigrant—influence your identity as you grew up?

A: Yeah, so when I was five years old, we moved from Mexico to Texas—this was back in the sixties—and I definitely got picked on for being Mexican and for not speaking English. So, in terms of my own identity that caused a lot of shame. A lot of shame about being Mexican.

K: Okay.

A: So, what I found was that I was light-skinned enough that I found I could pass as 'white.' And so, I did, I buried that part of my identity, and, you know, when I was around my parents I'd be like, "don't speak Spanish, speak English."

K: Wow.

A: Yeah, you know wanting to 'pass,' not wanting people to know I was Mexican. And, you know, it worked! And so then, later on, it was around middle school that I figured out I was attracted to boys as well as girls, and at the same time, started hearing all that name-calling around queer people. So, it's like, okay, I'll just do the same thing, bury that part of myself, and not allow it to be there. So, in terms of my identity, growing up, there was a lot of shame around who I was. And it wasn't

until after high school that I started coming out, and meeting other queer people, because, again, this was back in the days where there weren't positive role models.

K: Right, yeah.

A: And occasionally where there would be 'an effeminate man' on TV, or on a TV show or whatever, and they were the target of jokes or ridicule or whatever. Yeah. Ha, ha, ha. So, a lot of that shame. And you know, coming out is a life-long process, and you're still—after all these years—you're still having those twinges of shame... Not that self-hatred that I had at one time—but still those twinges of shame and the frustration with, you know, people not accepting, the acceptance of difference. And so, on both those counts, especially in the US, there still seems to be so much anti-immigrant rhetoric, and it's like *sigh* will this never cease?!

K: Yeah. It's amazing to me, like especially observed from over here in Japan, that maybe the anti-immigrant discourse has become even stronger than the anti-LGBT discourse in the States now.

A: Yeah, well it's been breathtaking the turn that has occurred, in terms of attitudes towards queer people. That's really been remarkable, you know, marriage acceptance... It's breathtaking.

K: Yeah!

A: And yet, there's still that backlash, that extreme right-wing that won't give up. For example, the book banning, you know, we can talk about that later...

K: Yeah, I actually have an American speaker coming to my class this week to talk about marriage equality, and Japan is the only country in the G7 that doesn't have legalized same-sex marriage, so it's interesting... like my students, overwhelmingly, are like "why is there a debate still going on?! We have no problem with this!" [chuckles] So hopefully the government is going to catch up with their views... but hey, I remember Ellen DeGeneres coming out on her show, and the backlash with that— and that's when I was in high school— and it's amazing how, twenty, thirty years ago, that was something that was such a hot topic, and now, at least in Canada, now everybody's like "what were we even thinking about with that being a debate?!"

A: And part of what I love about writing, for and about young people, is seeing that attitude in them, where it's not an issue. Yeah, so there's a lot of hope there.

K: Agreed. Thank goodness for our students! So, please tell me about writing the *Rainbow Boys* series—what inspired the characters and the plotlines?

A: Yes! So, this was in the early-nineties, when I was getting serious about writing. And what happened was, you know, when we talk about writer's block, and we think of that blank page, or

blank screen, and all sorts of writing blocks, well my block was not being able to finish things. Like I had all these unfinished stories, and—in retrospect—what I see happening was it was too personal, or too revealing, and I'd get scared. I'd be scared to be that honest.

K: Yeah.

A: And so, I'd go, "Oh, I have a better idea!" and so I'd start a new project, and then, just repeat that pattern... Finally, I realized I would never get anywhere that way, and I reached out to a couple of good friends, one was a songwriter, the other a papier mache artist, and we would encourage each other in our creative projects. So, with their help, I wrote this story about these two teenage boys. It was a little love story, and it was okay, but it didn't really have much conflict, or enough conflict, so I thought "what if I throw a third boy in there, and it creates this triangle?" And you get a lot more conflict. And that's *Rainbow Boys*.

I started writing about the love triangle between these three high school senior boys and it tells the story of these three boys that were on that coming out continuum, or spectrum, where you have Jason is very closeted, and Nelson is very out, and Kyle is in the middle there. And so, it enabled me to look back at high school and—while it's certainly not autobiographical—it has these qualities, you know, of crushes I had on other boys, and the shame that I felt, and the struggle to come out, and touching upon all those feelings.

K: Right.

A: At the same time, when I started writing it was when queer teens started coming out—in numbers—at schools. I would read their stories, like in our local gay paper, and be so inspired by their stories. And so, looking back on my experiences, with some wish fulfillment of what might have been, and taking inspiration from the lives of teens that I know, all around me, that's how that story came about. Then my friends suggested taking a writing workshop, which I did. My instructor loved my writing, and she said, "let me know when you're done with this novel, and I'll recommend you to my agent." So, after five years, my friends said, "Well you've worked on this long enough now. It's time to show this to someone." So, I called my former instructor up, and she sent in her recommendation.

K: Wow!

A: Yeah, and that's how that came about. And then the agent took it to the publishers, and most publishers, they didn't know what to do with it. Historically, there were so very few LGBTQ teens in YA books, and in the few instances where they were, there was this unspoken code that they had to either commit suicide or die tragically. So, they saw my book, and, it's like—wait a minute!—

not only do they not commit suicide or die tragically, they are actually connecting with each other, and they're not these lone characters. And it's an upbeat ending.

K: There was no model that you followed? It was the first? That's so cool!

A: So that's the way in which they saw it as groundbreaking. And I didn't plan it as a series—it was this resolved but unresolved ending. My editor says “now you know we've got to make a sequel?!” and I was like, “No, I didn't know that!” [laughter] And by that point, I was so sick of having worked on the book that I was like, “Argh!” But my agent was like, “So, they want a sequel? I suggest you do it!”

K: Well yeah! [laughter]

A: And after that, I wrote the third one, and that made the trilogy.

K: Well, the thing is, I want another! I loved the road trip so much, so then it's like, “What happens next?!” Do you think there's any chance of revisiting them, and going back to the *Rainbow Boys*?

A: Nah... no, no. There was a chance at a time, but my editor at that point, he was like, no, this was the young adult imprint and we just take them through high school. If you want, we can refer you to another imprint, but this is it for us. So... [shrugs]

K: Well, I'm sure they're doing well! [laughter] I just loved it! All three characters were so endearing— it was wonderful!

A: Well, thank you. And you're not alone! I get emails all the time about “what happens to them?!” and so I email, “Well, Jason and Kyle, they stay together, and they got married, and Nelson did find love.” So, people can sleep at night! [laughter]

K: That's great news. Yay! Okay, let's go in a different direction: Why are your books important for young readers and educators to read?

A: Well, I think because, especially now, young people are growing up at a time when one of the key issues is identity. Because of globalism, democratization, and the internet... It's like, young people get to choose who they want to be and, you know, when I was growing up, so much was not having language and not having words to put to what I was going through. Now young people have that language, they have the words, they have the images— they're just a click away from so much diversity, and it causes them to question who they are and what they want to be, in terms of their expression, in terms of their life choices, in terms of following their hearts and their dreams. Books like mine give them the stories to attach to that. You know, well, if I am queer, what can my life be like? That's what I did not have when I was growing up. Not only did I not have the

role models in terms of people, in terms of images, I did not have the role model in terms of what that story would be.

K: Right.

A: I'm working on a memoir now where going back to, you know, when I was in high school, my Dad was a university professor, and going to his university library, and sneaking over to the psychology section to try to understand what I was feeling, and finding books that told me I had a mental illness. That if I acted on my sexual desires with another man, that was a criminal offense. And I could be imprisoned. So, you know, that was the story that I had, and so for young people now, growing up, to have stories of what their lives could be like... give them both, you know, positive and negative stories that allow them to make choices.

K: Yeah.

A: So, for example, people love Nelson [chuckles], like the character Nelson [from the *Rainbow Boys* series], and he screws up all the time! [laughter] Yes, and he screws up, but that's what we love about him! He screws up, and he learns from it. And young people, that way, can live vicariously through the characters and choose for themselves. You know— what would be our choices? One of my editors taught me that you can have your characters do anything you want, but they have to experience the consequences. And there have to be real consequences. So, on all of those counts, I think that's why those books are so important.

K: Yeah. I totally agree. And you already touched on my next question, by talking about what you encountered at your father's university library, but let me just ask when you were a young LGBT person, what was your experience in the library? Were there any books that you found helpful? Any fiction?

A: Nope.

K: There was nothing?

A: Never.

K: Wow...

A: Not at all. Now, the library at my high school was a real place of refuge for me. That's where I would go and be with, you know, my friends the books! Unfortunately, there were no books that dealt with homophobia, or same sex romantic attraction, but it was a safe place, and same with the public library. I've always loved libraries, and you know there were books, like as a boy, my favorite book was the story of Ferdinand, the bull. You know, he loved to smell the flowers instead of

being in fights! So even though it's not a queer story, it's a story about being true to who you are, and that it's okay to be different. So, there were stories out there that I loved. As young queer people, we're very adept at putting ourselves into the shoes of straight people... now it begs the question as to why it's so hard for straight people—so many straight people—to put themselves in the shoes of queer characters! [chuckles]

K: Right?!

A: That's where the straight teen girls are so great at that. They're like, "We don't care! We're so used to reading about boys anyway, so why not?!"

K: Well, what a gift you're giving these young readers, that now you have populated those shelves and they're able to go in and read YOUR books! And are there many people writing this genre of writing?

A: Oh yeah!

K: Really?

A: Oh yeah! I mean, there are so many stories with straight characters, and then there's the trope of the gay best friend, or the lesbian best friend, and now there's the trans characters, too. Which, you know, for people who are targeting books, in terms of banning, they've got their job cut out for them because even if they take out all the books that are on their lists, now there's all these other books with queer secondary characters and they're not stopping! So, it sort of reveals their agenda of getting all books off the shelves, right?

K: Let's jump into that. Please share your opinion of banning books and the politicization of gender identities in the United States right now. How can allies support authors and gender diverse people right now?

A: Well, I think it's happening now that there's a backlash **to** this backlash, where there's lawsuits now, and people are saying, "No. This is wrong." Libraries are public spaces, and if a parent doesn't like a certain child to be reading a certain book, well, that's up to the parent what to do with their child. I have not heard anyone argue against that, it's when people want to decide what **other** people can read, and what should be on public shelves. It's frustrating that this is happening, and I'd say it's a little scary that they're getting so much attention, but I'm heartened that there are so many people standing up, and be it people on library boards or people in school boards, they're saying "No, no, this is crazy. This is not democracy. And no, we're not going to allow this."

K: Have any of your books been on ban lists?

A: Uh... I think all of them!

K: All of them! Oh my god! [laughter] That's so appalling! Wow. Are people writing letters, or going to protest these book bans? What's happening?

A: So what happens is, from what I understand, there's basically a group of people that made very good use of the internet, and use of groups all around the country, who go to school board meetings and go to speak to principals and school administrators and superintendents, and they have very loud voices, and, well, especially schools, they don't like controversy. So, we need to continue to speak out, chip away at that dialogue, like "Hey, what about all those queer kids out there? What about all those straight kids who have gay or lesbian family or parents or friends?"

K: Mm-hmm.

A: Those kids matter too. And, as I said, they need stories. We all need those stories. You know, what books do, as Rudine Sims Bishop said famously, books serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, and we need to be providing those to create a healthy and compassionate world.

K: That's beautiful. Okay—let's talk about some other books! What inspired you to write *The God Box* (2007)?

A: So, one of the most rewarding—perhaps the most rewarding—parts of writing for young people is hearing from them. And especially in the age of the internet, I get so many emails from young people saying how much my books mean to them.

K: Right.

A: I started hearing from so many teens who were struggling to reconcile their sexuality and their spirituality, and so even though I was not brought up in a particularly religious household, there was that aspect of it—out there in the culture—of how homosexuality is 'bad' and 'wrong' and 'sinful'. And so, I absorbed some of that guilt when I was in high school and I'd pray "God, take away these feelings. I don't want to be like this." So to hear from these young people, it inspired me to go back to that time, and—like I'd done with the other books—it reminded me of what it was like to grow up and write that story of a boy struggling with that particular conflict, and have another boy who is modern day and 'no, I've resolved this, I'm good with this!' and having them fall in love.

K: Yeah. I thought it was a really warm story, and the girl being supportive—I mean, at first it hurt—but then being supportive of her ex-boyfriend coming out. Out of the books that you've

written so far—I mean, I imagine the *Rainbow Boys* trilogy has a huge following—but of the stand-alone books, are there certain ones that have been particularly embraced?

A: Yeah, *Rainbow Boys*, *So Hard To Say*, and *The God Box*... I guess most of them!

K: Yeah, I can see it! Like I mean there are so many kids out there that have had that conflict, and must be so grateful and relieved to read that book. I also didn't grow up in a religious house, but I have a lot of friends that would have, no doubt, had that very problematic message from every Sunday at the pulpit, so I thought it was a lovely book. But then I loved all of them! All of the characters are so approachable and likable. So how about *Bait* and *You Brought Me the Ocean* and *The Greatest Superpower*—what were the motivations and inspirations for writing those books?

A: So, again, it was going back into my life and experiences that I had with being sexually abused and so with that book (*Bait*) it took a long time to get there to be able to write it. A lot of the time I was writing it, I was crying, and it was very cathartic.

K: Wow.

A: Yeah, but there's still, I mean despite, you know, all the clergy abuse stories in the press, there's still so much shame around talking about male/male sexual abuse.

K: Yeah.

A: The book has done well, and it's certainly got the awards, and yet, I still think there's resistance. Resistance around it. So, that was *Bait*, and then *You Brought Me The Ocean*, that was just so much fun to write!

K: Cool!

A: It was my first graphic novel, and to see an artist bring my creation to life, visually,

K: And so beautifully!

A: So beautifully, yes—every illustration is a painting! Usually graphic, comic book illustrations, they can be so stylized and cartoon-ish, and what the illustrator was able to do was just amazing.

K: Yeah. It's gorgeous.

A: It was gorgeous! And so, it was so much fun to write, and the process with working with Julie (the illustrator), and then the editor, and also just in terms of the story, you know, going back again to my own growing up, and how empowering it would have been to read about a gay superhero. And then to be able to see the metaphor, and to write the story on the two tracks of Jake hiding

and then coming out, accepting himself as gay, at the same time he is recognizing and accepting his superpowers.

K: Right!

A: Just that whole metaphor that growing up queer is such a great superhero metaphor... we have this secret, a secret identity, that we're afraid to share with other people, and so we end up having these double lives, where some people know about us, and other people don't!

K: Exactly.

A: And as soon as the supervillain shows up, you know, homophobia and transphobia, we have to always be facing this huge villain! [chuckles] That whole metaphor was so fun to work with.

K: Absolutely!

A: And then *The Greatest Superpower* was, you know, with my own growing up, questioning around gender, and having so many transgender friends, that inspired that story.

K: I thought it was interesting that you made the parent the trans person in the story. Did you consider having the (teen) protagonist be trans, or was it, right from the beginning, that you decided to make it the parent?

A: Yeah, right from the beginning I thought, yeah, this is going to be the parent.

K: And I LOVED them! And they were so sweet! Like, "of course you are going to have to be proud of your dad!" Yeah, what a brave person... It was nice, too, that it doesn't always have to be the protagonist, but the protagonist's family, their friends, their loved ones— but maybe it's, as allies, how are we supposed to champion them? That was very cool.

A: Thank you!

...

K: Are there some good, queer young adult books or things you recommend we should check out as educators here in Japan?

A: You know, there are literally so many now...

K: Yay!

A: But yeah, I should put together a list. Some of my favorites.

K: Yeah, that would be great. It's so nice to see that it's become its own genre. I think that would be really helpful, particularly speaking as someone who is teaching at the university level. I think that having young adult books, for second language learners, it's at a level and has messages that I think they'd be able to understand. As language learners, having characters and social justice issues that they can grapple with would be particularly good for our Japanese learners here.

A: Yeah, and there are so many now, queer teen stories that are intersectional.

K: Yes, and exploring those intersections is key. That was one of the big takeaways that I had from your JALT talk for GALE that rather than teaching social justice issues directly to our students, we can give them stories where these issues and identity categories come through the characters and their experiences. I think that may be a more effective way for students to learn, and think about and talk about these things.

A: Absolutely.

K: And on that note, please tell us about your experience as a GALE Featured Speaker for the JALT 2022 Conference. What were the highlights for you?!

A: Oh gosh! Well, I enjoyed it and thanks for inviting me! I enjoy speaking, so usually I'm 'on' and then I don't remember what I've said!

K: Do you have any advice, especially for people here in Japan, on ways we can use your books to bring important issues into our classrooms? For educators in GALE, what would you advise us to think about?

A: Well, I think what you said before is to provide those stories. As a way to talk about things that young people want to talk about. And lots of times, they are waiting for us as adults to open the conversation. That's where we as adults can be so helpful. Saying, "Okay, you're seeing these things in the news, and maybe you have friends or family who either are open or you suspect might be LGBT, so why don't we read a book about that and talk about that?"

K: Yeah. It's actually pretty simple, isn't it?! Just providing a safe space for students to think about and talk about these things, with no judgment.

A: Exactly.

K: And giving them characters and giving them stories—even if they DON'T have people like these in their lives, then they DO because they have these characters that they care about!—it just becomes something that, rather than being an issue to be discussed, it's just being there to talk about and support these characters that they become attached to, right?

A: Absolutely! And to always remember that, you know, you all have queer students?! And they may not be out, but they are there. I remember this really shameful experience when I was in college, where it was in a Literature course—it was actually a World Literature course—and one of the books had queer characters. And this was at a time where there just weren't that many queer characters, and the teacher was trying to have a sympathetic conversation about these characters, and no one in class said they knew anyone who was queer. And they were making all these speculations like "What was the author saying here?" and I felt all this shame about just not being able to speak up and say, "Well, I'm gay." You know, I wasn't that out yet at the time. So, for teachers to remember that you **do** have LGBT students in your classes. And you may not know it, but just because you don't know it, it doesn't mean that they're not there.

K: Exactly!

A: And they matter. And these stories matter to them. And the impact that can have, like as you said, of having a safe space, where students may come up to you afterwards and may come out to you.

K: Yeah! Just yesterday in class—we were talking about Japan and the debate over marriage equality, preparing for this guest speaker who was coming to our class—and one of my students was like "I don't really understand why legalizing same-sex marriage is such a big deal. Like, I'm bi!" And I'm so grateful and privileged that they feel safe to share that with me. I don't think that even ten years ago I would have seen students working in a group discussion feel able to share that in the classroom, and it's a real privilege. It's wonderful.

A: There you go!

K: Thanks so much for your time and your insights, Alex.

A: You're very welcome!

And as a bonus, Alex followed up with a list of recommendations for further reading:

Ten LGBTQ teen books I loved in random order:

All Boys Aren't Blue by George M. Johnson (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020)

Black Flamingo by Dean Atta (Hachette UK, 2019)

Flamer by Mike Curato (Henry Holt Books for Young Readers, 2020)

Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe (Oni Press, 2019)

The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue by Mackenzi Lee (Katherine Tegen Books, 2018)

Heartstopper by Alice Oseman (Graphix, 2020)

King and the Dragonflies by Kacen Callender (Scholastic Press, 2020)

Last Night at the Telegraph Club by Malinda Lo (Dutton Books for Young Readers, 2021)

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda by Becky Albertalli (Balzer + Bray, 2016)

Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan (Ember, 2015)

For more information on Alex and his wonderful books, visit <https://www.alexsanchez.com/>

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