



ON MICHAEL WILLHOITE'S

Daddy's Roommate

SARA ROAHEN

On his first day of first grade, my six-year-old son brought home a get-to-know-you questionnaire. It asked for his favorite sport (jiujitsu), his favorite food (pancakes), his favorite television show (something with superheroes), etc. The answers were mostly predictable. When we got to his favorite book, he answered unequivocally: “*Daddy's Roommate*.”

I glowed, though I tried to do it internally. Michael Willhoite's *Daddy's Roommate*, originally published by Alyson Books in 1990 and currently out of print, is narrated by a boy roughly my son's age with an openly gay father. I had checked it out from the local library in June, LGBT Pride Month, and his fondness for the book made me feel that I was succeeding at raising a twenty-first-century child. I was also delighted because while he had

always loved to be read to, my son had never before gotten attached to a particular book. He went through books like he now goes through Lego sets: finish and then cast aside, possibly destroy. I never had to read *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* for the three hundredth time, which I appreciated, though sometimes I did wonder whether my son's literary detachment meant he was skipping some important developmental step.

But last summer he insisted on reading *Daddy's Roommate* again and again and again. He couldn't wait for his dad to get home from work so they could read it together. He showed it to his babysitters; he loaned it to his cousins.

The book opens with the line “My Mommy and Daddy got a divorce last year” and the image of a boy and his mother looking out a window as his father packs suitcases into the trunk of a car. All of the characters look sober and a little shell-shocked, but friendly. The narrator goes on to explain that his father now lives with a man named Frank, and he details all the domestic pleasures that his dad and Frank engage in together: reading the newspaper in pajamas, doing housework, eating dinner, sleeping, shaving, parenting the boy, and even arguing and making up. In the edition I later purchased, none of the book's twenty-nine pages contains more than one sentence; the images are colorful and forthright. It's a fun, openhearted book, and yet with each reading, my son seemed to hold his breath until we got to a page close to the end that pictures the narrator sitting

on a stool in a kitchen while his mother, in a “World’s Best Mom” apron, concocts something from vanilla and milk and eggs. “Mommy says Daddy and Frank are gay,” the text reads. On the facing page, the boy looks directly into the eyes of the reader and says, “At first I didn’t know what that meant. So she explained it.”

At this point my son would turn the page so eagerly that I worried for the library book. Two images accompany the passage that captivated my son: first, there’s Frank embracing the boy’s father loosely from behind while the men gaze at each other contentedly, and then there’s a drawing of the boy and his father hugging while the mother looks on with apparent approval. Beneath these images, the text reads, “Being gay is just one more kind of love. And love is the best kind of happiness.”

The book wraps up with two more pages, but my son never cared to read them. For him, the story’s climax on love was also its resolution. We had discussed same-sex relationships and marriage many times before, but this straightforward presentation of the topic, with a cartoon kid as his guide, seemed to bring the abstract to life for him.

He has wanted to discuss dynamics of the heart since he could speak, and so I wasn’t entirely surprised that *Daddy’s Roommate* touched a nerve. The first conversations I remember having with him involve love: my love for him, his for me, ours for the cat. When you ask him today what he wants to be when he grows up, he says a doctor and a daddy. He didn’t talk about his classmates much in preschool

and kindergarten, except to report whose parents were getting divorced, whose were cohabitating with lovers, and whose lived in different states. His interest was not a judge’s, but a budding sociologist’s.

On his second day of first grade, my son brought home a note requesting that we send his favorite book to school. All of the first graders’ special books would live in a basket in the classroom for a couple of weeks so that they could browse the various selections and thereby learn about each other.

I felt a twinge of naughtiness when I sent *Daddy’s Roommate* to the school, but I talked myself through it. After all, the Supreme Court had officially normalized same-sex marriage the same month we discovered *Daddy’s Roommate*. The book had survived in our public library system despite having been the second-most frequently challenged book nationwide between 1990 and 1999, according to the American Library Association, and the New Orleans Public Library has no record of it ever having been challenged here. The priest who oversees the religious education at my son’s Episcopal school lives with his husband in the rectory and performs gay marriages in the church. I know of at least two families with same-sex parents whose kids attend the school.

And on top of all that, I reminded myself, *Daddy’s Roommate* is an age-appropriate exploration of what happens in a child’s life when his father, who used to be married to the child’s mother, comes out of the closet. Which is to say that the story is about love, not sex. It’s simple and direct and sweet.

Roughly two hours after *Daddy's Roommate* arrived on her campus, my son's principal left me a voice mail and an e-mail to say that I could find the book on her desk. She would not allow it in the classroom. The principal didn't mention the most common critiques on sites like Amazon and Goodreads, which focus not on moral objections but stylistic ones: that the illustrations are dated and sometimes stereotypical (gay men with moustaches and muscle shirts, gay men singing around a piano after dinner) or that the mother figure appears cheerful and supportive when surely she must be pissed off and humiliated. Rather, the principal felt the book might inspire the first graders to ask questions the teachers were not prepared to answer. She assured me that differences in family units would be addressed later in the school year in a class called Life Skills, but that the teachers would not use the word *gay* in the classroom, "as we feel that sometimes that word can be used in a derogatory manner." *Daddy's Roommate*, therefore, would never be welcome.

My son spotted the book in my hand when I picked him up from school that afternoon. He cried a little bit when I explained the principal's decision. "Some grown-ups might not think it's appropriate," he argued, "but I *know* my friends would love the part about love." I gave him full permission to tell his friends all about that part.

Of course I agree that *gay* is sometimes used in a derogatory manner, and that's why I'm grateful for books like *Daddy's Roommate*. I also agree that a first-grade classroom is

no place for a sex-ed lesson, which must have been the principal's greatest fear. But in all the weeks we had been enjoying and discussing *Daddy's Roommate* at home, sex had never entered the conversation. Sex doesn't enter the conversation with our first grader when his dad and I talk about where we met, or how we fell in love, or why we decided to get married, or the day he was born, either. It doesn't even enter the conversation when our son crawls into bed with us at 3:00 AM, separating our entwined limbs and forcing us to put on pajamas. Sex doesn't enter the mind of a six-year-old unless a grown-up puts it there.

The principal suggested we bring in another favorite book to share, but my son didn't have another favorite book. On the one hand I felt pride—pride that he had chosen *Daddy's Roommate* in the first place, and pride that he had stood his ground and refused to choose a consolation book. On the other hand, it smarted when, soon after the whole incident, he stopped wanting to read it.

I paid mightily for our own copy of the book, and one of its sequel, *Daddy's Wedding*. I hope for a day when my son will again feel the pull of its touching, innocent story. *Being gay is just one more kind of love. And love is the best kind of happiness.* He has no idea that, for the principal, for the parents of his classmates who might have objected to it, and even for me in some ways, *Daddy's Roommate* is about sex. But six-year-olds know what shame feels like, and they know how to avoid it.