



TIM TEEMAN IN AMERICA

Why fighting bullying is more important than marriage

It's all about gay marriage. David Cameron wants it legalised – and so a Tory PM has audaciously outpaced a US Democrat President who says his views on gay marriage are 'evolving'. Gay marriage has become the activists' battle cry: it's sexy, emotional, and the pictures rock in the papers. But more pressing, difficult and less sexy is the battle to get the next generation safely to the church on time.

The same day that Cameron declared his aim to legalise gay marriage, it was announced that Brandon McInerney, a heterosexual and troubled Californian teen who shot dead Larry King, a young gay (and troubled) teen, in a California classroom would stand trial for murder in an adult court for a second

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time after the first case was declared a mistrial.

McInerney, 17, was 14 years old when he shot King, 15, twice at point-blank range, after subjecting King to a campaign of anti-gay bullying. McInerney's supporters claim King sexually harassed his murderer, which brings to mind the 'gay panic' defence of yore; essentially, 'the gay person provoked me into killing them by coming on to me'. As a defence, it stinks of homophobia.

The hate-crime component of McInerney's charges, present in the first trial, will not be levelled in the second; legal experts said it made it hard to secure a conviction. Gay rights campaigners want a plea deal to be reached. Trying McInerney a second time would 'only dig into old wounds that have never been given a chance to heal', said Eliza Byard, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian And Straight Education Network.

But the hate-crime element should be aired, given the testimonies of King's classmates who witnessed the homophobic bullying. After a gay kid commits suicide, or a murder like King's occurs, powerbrokers inevitably say it is an awful tragedy that shouldn't have happened. Well no, it shouldn't. But had laws been equal, had all the tendrils of homophobia not entwined for that kid at home and at school, then maybe it wouldn't. So shouldn't our politicians do whatever is necessary – in law, school, everywhere – to fight homophobia? The context behind gay teen suicide and violence is blatant, and powerbrokers – despite their wrung hands and fine, grave words – are culpable in these tragedies and apparently too gutless to address them actively.

Sure, there are 'It Gets Better' videos, and people say the right things about bullying, although this seems to have morphed into a general anti-bullying 'message' rather than one focused on anti-gay bullying as it should be. Protecting and fighting for the next gay generation won't lead to sexy pictures of gay couples wreathed in smiles, but we should be fighting for them as hard and urgently as we are fighting for the right to get covered in confetti and adopt double-barrelled surnames.

CLASSIC READ

QUEEN LUCIA

EF Benson

Black Swan



EF Benson's *Queen Lucia* series is an exquisite look into British upper-middle-class life in the 20s and 30s.

Lucia is an epic snob with extraordinary pretensions, her efforts to maintain her position as queen of the small town of Riseholme both sublimely ridiculous and madly engrossing. Despite her Malvolio-like blunders she is infinitely likable – especially when later pitted against the scheming Miss Mapp.

It is through the eyes of foppish Georgie, Lucia's loyal companion, that her antics are largely observed, and in Georgie, Benson created one of the most lovable gay characters in English literature. Obsessed with his youth and frightened by his hair-loss, it is impossible for a modern reader not to understand Georgie as an ageing homosexual – hag-fag to Lucia's one-woman bandwagon.

As a gay man in the early-19th century, Benson would have known all about the hardship of being gay, and with the Lucia books he made a world in which sexuality simply does not factor: the closest the characters come to sex is getting into panicked states at the prospect of it. These are wonderful, wonderful novels – a startling combination of razor-sharp wit and compassionate warmth. No wonder Noel Coward and WH Auden are credited with the words, 'We will pay anything for Lucia books.' Read at any cost.