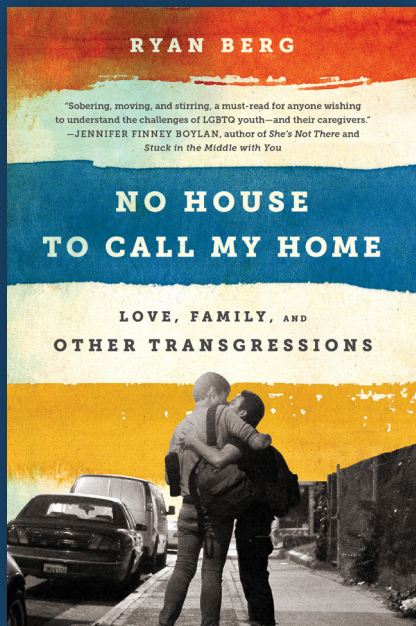




## GENERAL NONFICTION WINNER

Category sponsored by  
*The Waterbury Group at Morgan Stanley*



## *No House to Call My Home: Love, Family, and Other Transgressions* by Ryan Berg

NATION BOOKS/PERSEUS BOOKS GROUP



The Friends, as the Library of Congress-designated Minnesota center for the book, organizes the year-round, statewide activities of the Minnesota book awards.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

In this lyrical debut, Ryan Berg immerses readers in the gritty, dangerous, and shockingly underreported world of homeless LGBTQ teens in New York. As a caseworker in a group home for disowned LGBTQ teenagers, Berg witnessed the struggles, fears, and ambitions of these disconnected youth as they resisted the pull of the street, tottering between destruction and survival. Focusing on the lives and loves of eight unforgettable youth, *No House to Call My Home* traces their efforts to break away from dangerous sex work and cycles of drug and alcohol abuse, and, in the process, to heal from years of trauma.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Ryan Berg** is a Lambda Literary Foundation Emerging Writers Fellow and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Hunter College in New York. He received the New York Foundation of the Arts Fellowship in Nonfiction Literature in 2011 and has been awarded artist residencies from the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. His work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Slate*, *The Advocate*, *Salon*, *Local Knowledge*, and *The Sun*. In addition to writing, Berg is the Program Manager for ConneQT Host Home Program in Minneapolis, where community members share their homes and resources with LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. Berg has spoken at universities and conferences across the country discussing youth homelessness and the host home model. Visit [www.nohousetocallmyhome.com](http://www.nohousetocallmyhome.com).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Berg suggests that the narrow focus on marriage equality among LGBTQ rights advocates has resulted in the neglect of other pressing issues. What does he see as the intersecting challenges that LGBTQ individuals face?
2. In the introduction, Berg states: "This isn't a story of a white man attempting to "save" or speak for young queer people of color. I do not claim their experiences as my own." How does he acknowledge the skewed power dynamic between himself and the youth he writes about in the narrative?
3. We meet Benny after years in foster care. At the end of the chapter 1 he is about to graduate from high school and he's optimistic, saying: "Things are going to be good. I can feel it." What are the challenges that Benny will face outside the system? How is he prepared or ill-prepared to live independently and why?
4. By conventional standards, Alexander is more successful than his peers. What qualities or actions were instrumental in achieving that success? How does his past differ from the other youth in the book?
5. Berg points out that there is an overrepresentation of youth of color in the foster care system and that some benefit from the system while others are oppressed by it. What is the correlation? What is Berg suggesting?
6. When noting ways to combat LGBTQ youth homelessness, Berg says: "More beds in shelters are a temporary solution, a Band-Aid for a gushing wound." He is suggesting that in order to eradicate youth homelessness we need to address the causes of homelessness: racial disparity, homophobia/transphobia, subpar mental health services, and systemic oppression. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
7. Berg interacted with the youth in the book for two years and witnessed most of the events that he describes. How might the book be different if Berg had chosen to remove himself from the narrative? Why did he choose to include himself as a character?
8. How have your ideas of power and privilege changed since reading *No House to Call My Home*? Were there moments when you felt empathy for the youth in the book? Were there moments when you felt alienated? If so, when and why?

28TH ANNUAL

# MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide, year-round outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Saint Paul Public Library and the City of Saint Paul.

GENERAL NONFICTION CATEGORY SPONSORED BY:

## Morgan Stanley

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## A CONVERSATION WITH RYAN BERG

**Could you describe how you came to work as a residential counselor for LGBTQ youth in New York City?**

I started working with LGBTQ youth in foster care in 2004. I'd been working in theater before that and was feeling the conversations within that community were taking place in silos. I felt a need to do something outside myself, so I applied to work at a group home.

**Did you experience the events depicted in the book with a mind toward writing about them one day? At what point did you decide this story needed to be told?**

I hadn't intended to write about the youth, it felt too exploitive. I didn't want my writing to steer my experiences with them. During the summer of 2005 I went to the University of Iowa for a creative writing workshop for social workers and it was there I put down the first pages. I was encouraged by the instructor to continue writing after the workshop ended. Once I returned to New York I shelved the pages, and focused on working with the youth again. It wasn't until I left my position and started an MFA at Hunter College that I realized I couldn't shake these stories. I really felt an urgency in telling them. These stories felt unavoidable. There was nothing being said about the youth experience of homelessness in the media, especially LGBTQ youth. We know the statistics – 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ – but statistics become numbing. People really operate from empathy. My goal was to open a door into an unseen world, to focus on the lives of the young people experiencing the hardships that were addressed in the book.

**The book was published ten years after your time at the 401 and the Keap Street Youth Home. How did your writing change over the course of those ten years?**

I learned about humility writing this book, I learned about privilege. The writer who wrote the initial pages in 2005 was a much more sentimental, naive person. Over the course of writing the book I became more aware of issues of mass incarceration, systemic oppression, racial and economic justice, and the role of well-intentioned white social workers in the lives of young people of color. I learned about power, about the uncomfortable reality of my own power. I had to turn the lens inward and do some work on myself in order to attempt to do these stories justice. There's a great responsibility in writing about others. The inherent challenge was how to do it while honoring their stories and their privacy. Writing about others – especially people already marginalized – creates such a skewed power dynamic. I

wanted to make sure that I was exercising that power as justly as I could. I needed to interrogate my motives for writing the story. I was aware of my own privilege and power in that moment and tried not to shy away from it. My hope is that this book creates space for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness to tell their own stories, that their own memoirs begin to emerge, becoming the necessary corrective to history.

**What do you hope your readers will take away from *No House to Call My Home*? Have there been any surprising outcomes since its publication?**

Many people think “homeless” and picture a stereotype. We need to deepen the conversation. I hope readers see the nuance and complexity and resilience of the young people in this book and are moved to evoke change within their own communities. The circumstances of these young people's lives are disturbing, but all they experienced and expressed – the love, the loss, the turmoil, the betrayals – all these are universally human things and things anyone can relate to. The surprising and rewarding moments are when young people contact me and thank me for writing the book. Recently, a high school student came up to me after a reading. She told me her parents refused to accept her identity. She came home one day to find that they had moved away without telling her, leaving her homeless. She said she saw herself reflected in the story I read. Not only in the family rejection, but in the resiliency. She talked about how she doesn't make it to school as often as she'd like because right now work is more important. She needs to survive. She said, “I just wanted to thank you. I feel so invisible in my life. Listening to you felt like being seen.” If this book touches one young person and helps them rediscover their value, I feel the book has done its job.

**Share a little about your current work in Minneapolis and any plans you may have for a future writing project.**

I'm the program manager for the ConneQT Host Home Program. ConneQT Host Home, a program of Avenues for Homeless Youth, is a community and volunteer-based response to youth homelessness. All youth who participate in our program are queer-identified and matched with hosts. Hosts in the program are adults who open their homes and their hearts to young people who are looking for a healthy and stable connection, in addition to basic needs. The length of stay is anywhere from 1 week to 3 months.

My next writing project is about bullying, trauma, and LGBTQ youth suicide. Communities are failing our young people and I believe the subject needs thoughtful attention.