

Ready or Not...They're Gay Book Review, May 2009  
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Ready or Not...They're Gay: Stories from a Midwestern Family by Paul & Hjordy Wagner, Synergy Book, 2009, 150 pp., 16 pp. b&w illustrations, \$14.95, \$4.00 S/H. Order at [www.readyornotstories.com](http://www.readyornotstories.com), or go to Indie Bound to find a bookstore near you or use the traditional online bookstores.

Have you ever been to a PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meeting? If not, please consider visiting your local PFLAG group. Meetings are generally held monthly. You will be warmly welcomed, and all meetings are confidential. Most PFLAG gatherings have an informative section (less than an hour) when a speaker shares information on a subject relevant to the GLBT community. Or perhaps there will be a short video or other program with a brief discussion to follow.

The most important part, many participants feel, of a PFLAG meetings in a post-presentation storytelling session, as here in Naples (third Thursday of each month at 7:00 p.m., call 239-513-4568 for location). Attendees who wish to participate join a smaller private discussion group where they share, if they wish, their particular issues—discovering their child is homosexual, coming out, handling discrimination and any other matter of personal importance. Each person, who has the option of remaining silent, can gain from the insights of others. Help is made available, if requested.

The book *Ready or Not...They're Gay* is like a PFLAG storytelling session. Narrated in the simplest of prose, this personal testimony of a Wisconsin couple tells how they react to first one and then the second of their sons telling them he is gay. The book is Quaker simple. There is little or no attempt to embellish. Paul and Hjordy Wagner, both retired public school teachers, move slowly from naiveté to anguish, insight, acceptance and, finally, celebration. This is a personal story, not a psychological treatise or political manifesto.

The candid simplicity of *Ready or Not* is what makes it so valuable to any parent of a gay child or, for that matter, to any person concerned about the many issues surrounding being GLBT in a straight world. In particular, the book is an excellent primer for anyone first confronted with the issue of homosexuality in their own family. The most basic questions are clearly asked—and answered—in a manner everyone can follow.

The organization of the book reflects this intimate, personal character. Divided into very short chapters, sometimes less than a page, Part I is “Memories from Mom.” In it, Hjordy recalls when her eldest son, Brad, a handsome clean-cut high school athlete comes out. Then, several years later and still suspecting nothing, she is stunned when her second son, Andrew, comes out. Again there is anguish, self-blame, questioning and, ultimately, unconditional love and acceptance.

The bare, unadorned story continues in Part II, “Reflections from Dad,” where Paul Wagner relates his own view of his sons’ coming out and includes a “Top Ten List” of principles to follow. Among them are: having an open mind, getting educated, being nonjudgmental, showing support, and looking to the future.

Part III is from Brad and Andrew. Like his brother, Brad, Andrew he is a very handsome all-American “boy next door” who is initially puzzled by the disconnect between what he feels and what society expects. Luckily, his parents and, in particular, his grandmother rebound quickly from the shock of hearing their second son or grandson is gay. Again, the text is direct, clear and unembellished. Nothing comes between the reader and the gut-wrenching realities of a family struggling with an issue which, ultimately, brings them closer together.

Part IV, “Tools for Navigating Your Own Story” is a self-help kit of basic advice for parents, friends and educators. Even a relevant “Dear Abby” letter is reprinted.

Finally, Part V, “Stories from Others,” provides six additional perspectives on being gay or having homosexual children. While each of the sections has its own significance and style, I was particularly impressed with the longest chapter (15 pages) “How I Found My Way to a Loving Relationship.” It renders the lifelong struggle of a woman realizing, however reluctantly, that she is a lesbian. Cheryl Sutter eloquently records the many steps forward—and backward—in her spiritual journey from the condemnations of her childhood religion, the Wisconsin Synod of the Lutheran Church, to an accepting Methodist congregation. Cheryl concludes: I have “come to understand that God, The Divine, or any other name for The Sacred, is available to us all just as we are. Thank God.”

A final, brief chapter, “A Look at the Authors,” brings us up to date on Paul, Hjordy, Brad, and Andrew. Given how close the reader has come, through reading *Ready or Not*, to each of these family members, it is like receiving one of those circuit letters written at Christmas. We are pleased to receive it all ends happily. Mom and Dad are emotionally, intellectually and spiritually enriched by having two gay sons. The sons, Brad and Andrew, are in long-term relations and doing well in their careers.

As Jody Huckaby, Executive Director of PFLAG National says on the back cover of *Ready or Not*: “We can all learn from their stories about the importance of unconditional love in a world that is oftentimes cruel to our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender loved ones.” Thank you, Hjordy and Paul, for this moving, direct book based on your personal experiences.