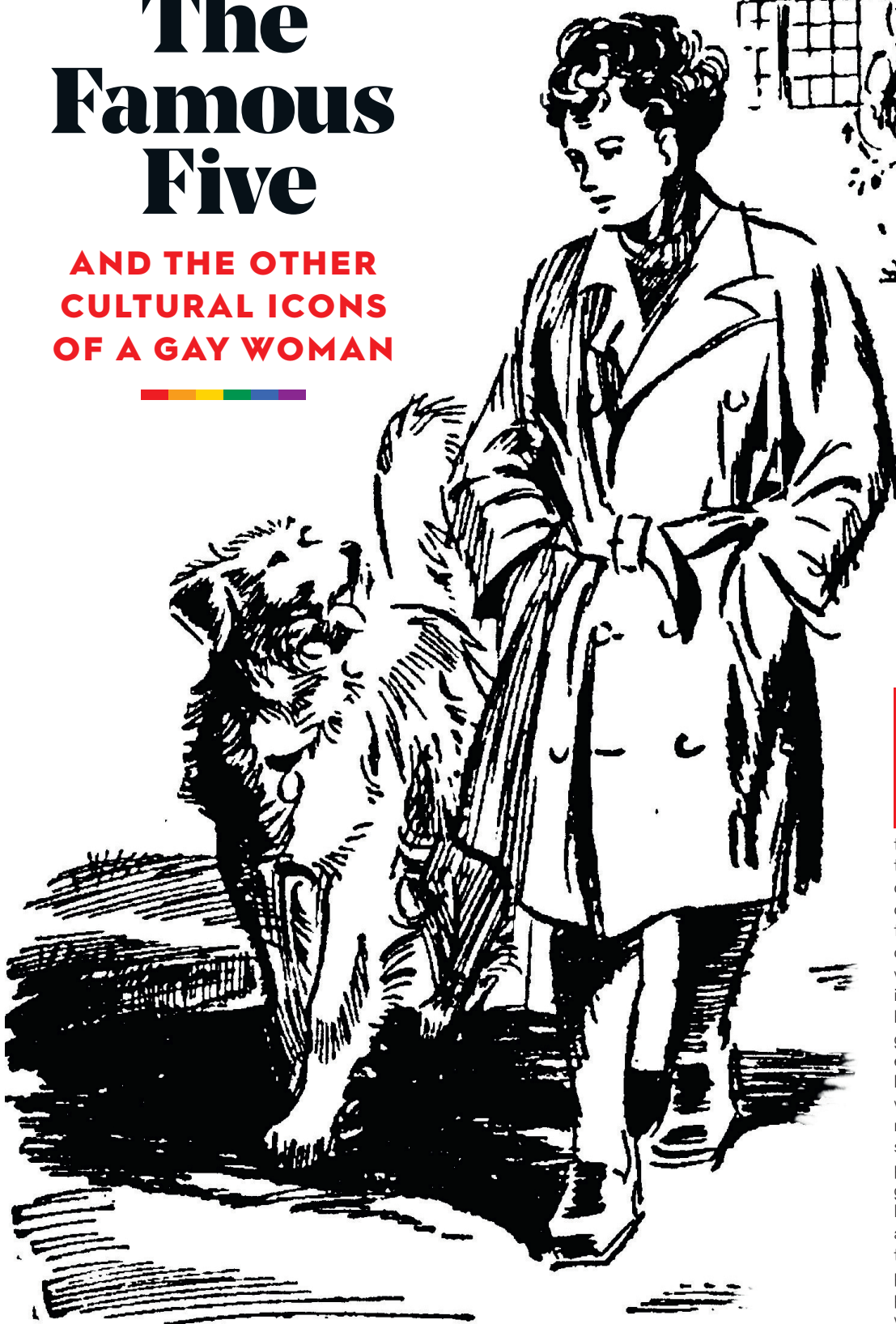


George from The Famous Five

AND THE OTHER CULTURAL ICONS OF A GAY WOMAN



As Pride month continues, writer Lotte Jeffs honours the women who shaped her as a young lesbian

I recently retrieved a box of old baby clothes from my mum's loft so I could hand them down to my first child (due to be born, auspiciously, on the day of London Pride). In it I found some of my old school books. While my friends covered theirs with pictures of boys from pop bands, mine were collaged with coded lesbian images: James Dean (beautiful and butch), Audrey Hepburn (girlfriend goals) and *The Basketball Diaries*-era Leo (boyish but pretty – a dream lesbian combo). No one would guess I was gay. How normcore these role models seem now, compared to the plethora of cool, out queer girls such as King Princess, Rowan Blanchard, Willow Smith and Amandla Stenberg that today's teens can look up to. My pin-ups came from a more limited pool, but my school-book collages were just for show. These are the women who really helped me define my self and my sexuality.

George from The Famous Five

I'm sure Enid Blyton is turning in her grave at the idea that amid the raft-building and lashings of ginger beer, tomboy George was actually a baby dyke or even (cripes!) transgender. But lines such as, "I hate being a girl. I won't be. I don't like doing the things that girls do. I like doing the things that boys do", were hugely exciting for me to read as a pre-teen. Not that I wanted to be a boy myself, I wasn't even a particularly good tomboy (with Hello Kitty bows in my hair and being crap at anything outdoorsy) but I wished I had a friend like George. When the BBC adapted the books for TV in 1995, I couldn't get enough of it. The girl playing George, with her short curly hair and mischievous smile, was exactly as I imagined her. At 13, she represented to me an otherness about myself I couldn't yet articulate and I think I was in love. Skip ahead 15 years and imagine my surprise when my best straight mate introduced me to his new girlfriend Jemima Rooper, the actor who played George. She's a good friend now but only recently did I muster the courage to tell her she was my first crush.



Ellen DeGeneres

The Puppy episode of *Ellen* [1997] changed my life. I was 15 and I watched the sitcom squeezed on the sofa between my mum and dad every Friday night. We didn't know the protagonist was gay, but I always felt there was something intriguing about her. It was partly her preppy outfits (which I tried to emulate) and partly her confidence and attitude – she wasn't like other young women I saw on TV. I had just started to question my own sexuality. My best friend had told me he was gay the year before and I didn't want to look as if I was copying him, but when I went with him to an LGBT youth group, I finally felt like I fitted in. So this was all spinning around my head as I sat watching the moment that Ellen accidentally announces she's gay over the Tannoy in an airport. I remember crying, weeping actually, because it made me feel so many things I didn't know what to do with. My parents couldn't understand my overreaction and I couldn't explain it. It was so monumentally powerful to see a woman on telly say those words for the first time ever and know that one day, probably quite soon, I'd have to say them myself.

Anna Nolan

I religiously watched the first season of *Big Brother* in 2000. Mostly because there was an actual gay woman in the house: Anna Nolan, the skateboarding ex-nun who played the guitar and was funny in the way I aspired to be. The big news for me, as I finished sixth form, was that she was gay and people still liked her. The public voted her runner-up. Maybe, I thought, being a lesbian wasn't just something people should 'tolerate' but that people should celebrate. Anna was the first real (as in not Ellen) gay woman I'd seen in the public eye and she was cool. She was the same mix of butch and femme I thought I was and watching her be reunited with her girlfriend on national TV was a huge moment – they held hands and it wasn't pretend! It would be four years until civil partnerships arrived, but the summer Anna Nolan came out of the *Big Brother* house was the summer I came out in full force, and went out into the world as my most authentic self.

"MAYBE, I THOUGHT, BEING A LESBIAN WAS SOMETHING PEOPLE SHOULD CELEBRATE"



The cast of The L Word

If emojis had existed in 2004 when I first saw *The L Word*, I would have broken my phone with the number of heart eyes I'd have sent everyone. Only other lesbians will understand the seismic impact a show about successful, sexy, glamorous gay women in LA had on our community. Finally, here was something portraying different kinds of lesbians, from funny to hyper femme, butch to bisexual, transgender, sort-of-straight and (my favourite) the insanely hot androgynous lothario Shane. And thanks to Bette and Tina, it was the first time I'd seen two women conceiving and parenting a child together. As a journalist for the gay press at the time, I went to an *L Word* convention where fans met the stars of the show. There was Beatles-level hysteria. My god, I thought, are we really this desperate to see aspirational versions of ourselves on screen that a pretty low-budget show with a not great script and increasingly unbelievable story lines (who did kill Jenny?) was enough for us? Yes, was the answer. Yes, yes, yes! Let's hope rumours of a reunion are true. Now I've morphed from a Shane to a Bette, I'm keen to see if I still feel the same love for them.

Amandla Stenberg

A few weeks ago, actor and activist Amandla Stenberg came out as gay. She'd previously spoken about being non binary and hating labels, so how refreshing it was to hear those two simple words "I'm gay" spoken. I was worried kids today might feel basic if they were 'just' gay, given how openly people now speak about the spectrum of sexuality. If I'd been 18 in 2018 I would have been thrilled that someone so cool had come out as gay. Today, other LGBTQ women of colour such as Lena Waithe are speaking for the doubly discriminated, and portrayals of our queer community are more diverse than ever. However, there's still some way to go until we reach true representation. And while I'd love to see more examples of lesbian couples having children, I'm starting to think it's time I became the role model I long for myself.



For more Pride content, pick up tomorrow's special issue of our brother magazine, *ShortList*

