June 2025

Out Toxicologists and Allies

Special Interest Group of SOT

Presidents Message:

Dear Out Toxicologists and Allies (OTA) Members,

I would like to extend a warm hello to my fellow OTA members! As the new OTA President, I want to make sure that OTA provides members with opportunities for networking and technical training in a supportive and fun environment. If you haven't participated in OTA activities previously, I encourage you to reach out to me or other OTA Board members to get involved - suggest a webinar topic, or better yet, volunteer to present a webinar! The OTA Board already has its sights on activities for SOT's 65th Annual Meeting in San Diego, CA from March 22nd to 25th, 2026. To that end, mark your calendars to submit abstracts from August 15 - November 13, 2025, which will be here before you know it. I am honored to be part of SOT and most importantly, to be part of OTA. I look forward to providing each of you with further reason to be part of OTA, and I want every single member of OTA to know they are an important part of the OTA community.

Sincerely,

Meg Whittaker, Ph.D., M.P.H., CBiol., F.R.S.B., E.R.T., D.A.B.T. (*she/her*)

President, OTA
Managing Director and Chief Toxicologist
ToxServices LLC
mwhittaker@toxservices.com

Spring ‘25 Newsletter

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Vacant Positions Currently Open on the OTA Executive Board!

The OTA Executive Board currently has two open positions: Secretary/Treasurer and Councilor. These roles are active now and will run through the 2026 annual meeting.

Due to being short-handed, we're also calling on our membership to step up and support two critical committees:

- *The Nominating Committee (selects our 2026 award winners)*
- *The Programming Committee (plans events for the 2026 meeting)*

In addition, we've previously faced challenges getting members to run for officer positions in our past elections. Looking ahead to Fall 2026 elections, we'll be seeking candidates for the following roles:

- *Vice President-Elect*
- *Secretary & Treasurer*
- *Junior Councilor*
- *Postdoctoral Representative*
- *Graduate Student Representative*

Now is surely the time to contribute to OTA's future. The sustainability and vitality of our organization depends on active, engaged members stepping into leadership. Thank you for being part of OTA and for any way you can serve and support it in the crucial years ahead.

Email Sarah Lacher for more information: selacher@umn.edu

Pride Month Celebration

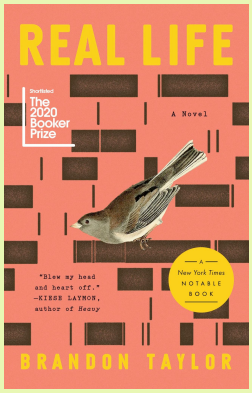
A Queer Science Reading List for June!

Happy Pride everyone! This Pride, we want to highlight some recent articles from OTA member and Past OTA President Troy Roepke focusing on the importance of queer representation in research. We are discussing writing similar pieces for the toxicology field. If you are interested in co-authoring with the OTA board, please contact Troy (ta.roepke@rutgers.edu). We've also included some non-academic books about queer scientists past and present. We hope these make it onto your summer reading list!

Journal Articles

- Moreira JD, Bates ML, **Roepke TA**. *Challenges and inclusive practices for LGBTQIA2S + scientists in the American Physiological Society.* PMID: 35687502
- Moreira JD, Haack K, White V, Bates ML, Gopal DM, **Roepke TA.** *I mportance of survey demographic questions to foster inclusion in medicine and research and reduce health inequities for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals.* PMID: 37115629
- Goetz TG, Aghi K, Anacker C, Ehrensaft D, Eshel N, Marrocco J, Young J, **Roepke TA**. *Perspective on equitable translational studies and clinical support for an unbiased inclusion of the LGBTQIA2S+community.* PMID: 36928352

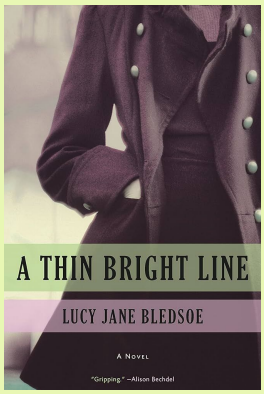
Fiction



***Real Life* by Brandon Taylor**

Brandon Taylor is a phenomenal writer and a one time graduate student in biochemistry. His first novel follows a queer Black doctoral candidate through the trials of graduate school in a college town where he knows few people. The novel, while sad, is beautiful, and a rare instance of life in the lab featuring in a work of literature. *Real Life* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2020.

Historical Fiction



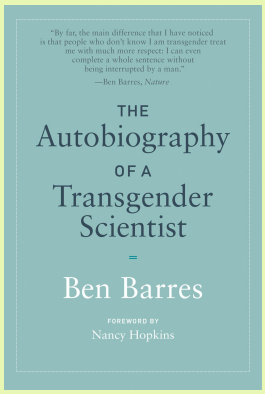
***A Thin Bright Line* by Lucy Jane Bledsoe**

This novel is a lightly fictionalized account of life of Lucybelle Bledsoe, an early climate scientist who worked on extracting some of the first polar ice cores. Lucybelle Bledsoe was also the author's aunt and namesake, but Lucybelle's life was a complete mystery to her niece until after her death. The novel is the culmination of the author's research into Lucybelle's career and well-hidden queerness, and explores what it would have been like to be a queer woman scientist in the McCarthy era.

Pride Month Celebration

A Queer Science Reading List for June!

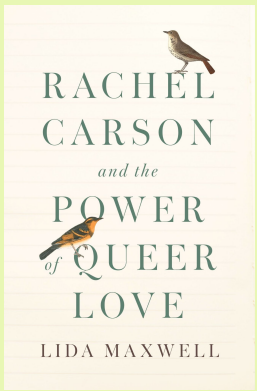
Biography



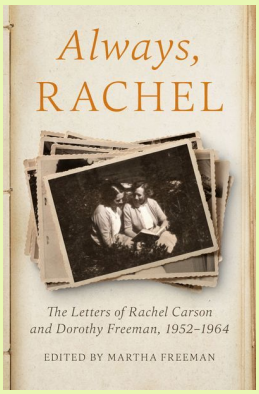
***The Autobiography of a Transgender Scientist* by Dr. Ben Barres**

Dr. Ben Barres is credited with being the first to understand the essential functions of microglia, and is, therefore, one of the most famous modern neuroscientists. Beyond his brilliance, Dr. Barres was also well known for his commitment to trainees and advancing the careers of women in academia. A true scientist, his autobiography is a little more focused on his research than himself, but he does touch on how his transgender identity shaped the way he saw gender inequality in STEM.

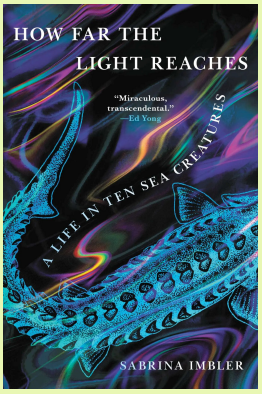
Essays



***Rachel Carson and the Power of Queer Love* by Lida Maxwell and *Always, Rachel* edited by Martha Freeman**



Rachel Carson had a decades long, widely known "close friendship" with a woman named Dorothy Freeman that has long been suspected or assumed to have been romantic. A selection of their letters was originally published in 1995 by Freeman's granddaughter, and plainly show how central naturalism was to their shared life, as well as how much they loved each other. The letters are quite sweet! Lida Maxwell's recent book delves into the historical context of their relationship, and reflects on how Rachel Carson's queerness might have influenced her environmental work.



***How Far the Light Reaches: A Life in Ten Sea Creatures* by Sophia Imbler**

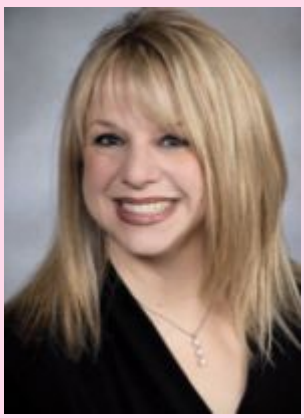
In this essay collection, Sophia Imbler uses the wonder of sea life as a vehicle for exploring aspects of their own life, particularly gender. Imbler describes their work as merging science writing and memoir, with each genre informing and improving the other to create a unique work of literature not quite seen before.

Congratulations to the 2025 OTA Award Winners!

2025 Graduate Student Achievement Award:
Brianna Finn, Michigan State University
Brianna demonstrates the intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and commitment to inclusive excellence that are essential for a successful trajectory in research. Congratulations Brianna!

2025 Postdoctoral Achievement Award:
Dr. Adam Schuller, Colorado State University
Dr. Schuller brings a strong commitment to both research and service. These qualities position him for a highly impactful career that will advance both scholarly knowledge and community well-being. Congratulations, Dr. Schuller!

2024 Mentoring Award:
Dr. Lauren Aleksunes, Rutgers University
Dr. Aleksunes has been a long time supporter of OTA. Her unwavering commitment to mentorship has left a lasting mark on her trainees, who speak with deep gratitude about her influence on their careers. OTA is proud to recognize her outstanding leadership and dedication to fostering the next generation. Congratulations, and thank you, Dr. Aleksunes!



The San Diego LGBT Community Center

At last year's annual SOT meeting, an incredible **$2,110** was raised to support the Orlando Youth Alliance (OYA), an organization dedicated to providing a safe space as well as programming for LGBTQIA+ and questioning youth in Central Florida. OTA members came together to raise funds, which were generously matched by Patrick Howell (OYA Board President), and his firm, Becker Lawyers.**Thank you, OTA!!**

In 2026, SOT will be held in San Diego, which is home to the San Diego LGBT Community Center! As OTA will be running another donation drive during the annual SOT meeting, we wanted to give you some information on this fantastic organization!

What's the San Diego LGBT Community Center All About?

The San Diego LGBT Community Center began in 1971 as an answering machine in a borrowed closet, and is now **one of the largest LGBTQ community centers in the nation**, providing the San Diego LGBT community with **over 84,600** direct service visits each year - wow!

The Center provides targeted programs and services to the **full diversity** of the San Diego LGBT community, including men, women, youth, seniors, transgender and non-binary individuals, black and Latino/a/x community members, families, and those living with HIV.

The Center has been part of some amazing "firsts":

- First court-ordered **same-sex domestic violence program** in the nation
- First program in the nation with **dedicated Latino/a/x resources**
- First **youth drop-in center** in San Diego
- The only agency to offer **free and anonymous HIV testing** in San Diego

Stay tuned for details on supporting the San Diego LGBT Community Center in 2026!

OTA Executive Board Spotlight:
Cat Lucey *(she/they)*,
Graduate Student Representative

How did you end up in the field of Toxicology?

I ended up in Environmental Toxicology because it was the field that best allowed me to combine my interests in basic biomedical research, public policy, and environmentalism. My grandfather was an agronomist, so even though I am a city kid through and through, nature and science have always been intertwined for me. The opportunity for environmental toxicology research to both protect our environment and prevent disease at a population scale is what keeps me motivated through long days in the lab!

What's your favorite example to use when explaining toxicology to a general audience?

Recently, my most used example to explain toxicology has been microplastics, because they've been in the news so much. It's a useful example, too, because it brings up two big aspects of environmental toxicology: first finding and measuring toxicants, then figuring out if they're bad for human health.

What's a topic that lights up your inner nerd (other than toxicology or anything directly related, something other than your day job)?

Outside of my PhD, I'm just as nerdy about cooking, textbook included! *On Food and Cooking* by Harold McGee is a huge but fun encyclopedia of the science behind flavor, the history of certain ingredients, and the molecular basis for why certain recipes work. Cooking feels like the best antidote to lab experiments - nothing too bad will happen if I mess up, and I don't have to follow the instructions too closely! If I'm not PhD-ing or cooking, I'm either frantically reading to keep up with my two bookclubs or figuring out new ways to entertain my cat, Ferdinand.

OTA Executive Board Spotlight:

Drake Phelps *(he/him)*, Postdoctoral Representative

How did you end up in the field of Toxicology?

I began my career in toxicology as an ORISE post-baccalaureate at US EPA with Dr. Tamara Tal. There, I studied how chemicals impact the microbiome which, in turn, perturb neurodevelopment. It opened my eyes to how research is done outside of academia and how environmental chemicals can impact public health. I would not be the scientist I am today without that position. This position also gave me the experience I needed before starting my PhD program at NC State University with Dr. Jeff Yoder to study the immunotoxicity of environmental chemicals, with a focus on PFAS. These positions allowed me to grow my technical skills but also harness my passion for protecting human and environmental health.

What's your favorite example to use when explaining toxicology to a general audience?

When I discuss toxicology with the general public, I usually share the story of PFAS with them. This class of chemicals have provided a lot of convenience in our daily lives, but after their creation, it was discovered that they have contaminated water, food, and people around the world. I have been able to meet and work with community groups that have been impacted by PFAS pollution, and hearing and sharing their stories helps turn this issue from an abstract concept to a tangible, real-world experience. When I discuss this with people who are unfamiliar with the story of these chemicals, it gives me a chance to relate to them and discuss common-sense solutions for how we can tackle environmental pollution.

What's a topic that lights up your inner nerd (other than toxicology or anything directly related, something other than your day job)?

Outside of the lab, I love my two dogs. Those two little weird creatures have driven me to learn more about dog behavior and cognition as a scientist and as a dog owner. After reading about how dogs "see" the world through their very skilled sense of smell, I even signed one of them up for scentwork classes. I got to see firsthand how my dog could track the faintest of scents. For them, it's all about finding treats, but it's been rewarding for me to see how they can hone their skills. In another life, I would absolutely be pursuing a career working with dogs.

OTA Executive Board Spotlight: Ashley Brinkman *(she/her)*, Junior Councilor

How did you end up in the field of Toxicology?

I was drawn to toxicology because of its interdisciplinary nature and its role in protecting health and the environment. I'd always been interested in science, but struggled to decide what to major in during my time as an undergraduate because I loved so many areas of science - biochemistry, physiology, anatomy, genetics, math, science communication, etc. As I was in the process of figuring out what I wanted to do after undergrad, I stumbled upon toxicology through a Google search, and learning about it felt like a light bulb turning on. Toxicology presented an opportunity to bring together all of the disciplines I loved and to do my small part in helping the world as well.

What's your favorite example to use when explaining toxicology to a general audience?

Since almost everyone is familiar with it, I've found that botulinum toxin (Botox) is a great example to help illustrate the concept that 'dose makes the poison'. An additional example I use to describe 'dose makes the poison', while it was an unfortunate incident, is the case of water intoxication that resulted from the "Hold Your Wee for a Wii" radio station contest (where the participant who drank the most water without urinating would win a Wii gaming console...not a great idea!).

What's a topic that lights up your inner nerd (other than toxicology or anything directly related, something other than your day job)?

Outside of toxicology, I'm very nerdy about bikes and road cycling. I love riding in endurance events, and my longest single-day bike ride was just over 170 miles. I also have a 100-pound (lap) dog, I play the flute, and I am very interested in bird watching and growing vegetables in my garden (however, the art of preventing squirrels from digging things up is something I have yet to master...).

OTA Executive Board Spotlight:
Sarah Lacher *(she/her)*, Vice President

How did you end up in the field of Toxicology?

I was doing research as an undergrad and we were working on a project involving induction of CYP3A4 by St John's Wort in mice. My mentor was a Toxicologist and I remember I asked him early on why *he* ended up in Toxicology and he said “IDK, being a Dr. of poison sounded pretty cool”. I agreed. I presented this project at my first SOT meeting in 2006 as an undergrad. Exposures and dose responses, identifying hazards and risks, examining ADME and investigating the molecular, organ-specific, acute, and chronic effects in environmental, occupational, clinical setting?! SIGN ME UP. By the end of the conference, it was clear to me that I already was a Toxicologist, this was my science, these were my people, and pursuing a PhD in Toxicology was my next career goal.

What’s your favorite example to use when explaining toxicology to a general audience?

My dissertation was focused on pesticides, BBB dysfunction (efflux transporter function and Parkinson’s Disease. I think this example allows me to also introduce the idea of the BBB and transport because most people can appreciate that 1st generation antihistamines make you sleepy, the 2nd generation don’t. So they can easily conceptualize the BBB and transport and how this might matter. After that, layering on pesticide brain distribution and the factors that might influence that seems like an easy connection to make.

What’s a topic that lights up your inner nerd (other than toxicology or anything directly related, something other than your day job)?

Recently I got a new tuba! It has 5 valves and my old one only had 3, and trying to understand the harmonics and logistics of which valve combinations do what and what ranges of the horn is fascinating. Also I can never remember so it's a surprise that just keeps on giving.

OTA Executive Board Spotlight:
Jess Plavicki *(she/her)*, Past President

How did you end up in the field of Toxicology?

My entry into toxicology was relatively late in my scientific training, but my interest in environmental health has been long standing. I joined the "Tree Committee" in 7th grade, which initiated my interest in conservation and contamination. However, I didn't recognize my love for science until I was an undergraduate studying neuroethology, neuroendocrinology, and evolutionary biology. My graduate work was in developmental neurogenetics and given my continued interest in environmentalism, I pursued a postdoc in developmental toxicology. My lab is a blend of my training experiences and examines research questions in the fields of both developmental toxicology and developmental genetics.

What's your favorite example to use when explaining toxicology to a general audience?

Radiation is often viewed as a scary and an inherently adverse environmental exposure, but people don't always know what constitutes radiation and when it becomes dangerous. When people ask me about radiation, for instance, I was asked by friend whether they should be concerned about radiation being released from a baby monitor, I use this as an opportunity to talk about the electromagnetic spectrum and properties that do or do not make radiation dangerous. I also want to take this opportunity to mention a great book by Timothy J. Jorgensen on the science and history of radiation called *Strange Glow: The Story of Radiation*.

What's a topic that lights up your inner nerd (other than toxicology or anything directly related, something other than your day job)?

I am obsessed with plants and adore creating both flower and vegetable gardens. I started with container gardens on my porch and a community garden plot and, since buying a home, have delved deeply into this passion. My neighbors and I have various bartering relationships and I am lucky to be able to trade veggies and bouquets for honey, eggs, and goat milk. My gardens are always evolving and changing as they expand. My goal is to look out every window of my home at every time of year and be able to see something beautiful. I love sharing my passion for nature with my four sons (3 human, 1 canine, all golden and goofy.

OTA Executive Board Spotlight:

Cody Smith *(he/him)*: VP Elect

How did you end up in the field of Toxicology?

I stumbled into a toxicology lab in undergrad and was immediately hooked. I loved learning about how the toxicology research performed at my university was being used to inform public policy.

What's your favorite example to use when explaining toxicology to a general audience?

Lately it has been microplastics and PFAS, but I'm a respiratory toxicologist by training, so I'm still partial to air pollution.

What's a topic that lights up your inner nerd (other than toxicology or anything directly related, something other than your day job)?

I'm fascinated by people who build worlds (e.g., George R. R. Martin, J. R. R. Tolkien. I love reading about the backstories of the characters and their familial lineages after watching episodes of *Game of Thrones* and reading LOTR.

Troy Roepke (*they/them*): Secretary & Treasurer

How did you end up in the field of Toxicology?

For my MS, I studied H2S exposure in marine invertebrates as I was interested in how marine organisms respond physiologically to environmental stressors to successfully reproduce. That work led to my interest in marine toxicology focusing on endocrine disruption in marine invertebrates for my PhD.

What's your favorite example to use when explaining toxicology to a general audience?

I will talk about BPA. Most people know about BPA.

What's a topic that lights up your inner nerd (other than toxicology or anything directly related, something other than your day job)?

I am an avid reader of SciFi/Fantasy and love RPG like Dungeons and Dragons (my usual character is a pansexual, half-elf Druid/Bard).

SOT 2025 Annual Meeting Recap

This past March, the 64th SOT Annual Meeting and ToxExpo was held in Orlando, Florida. We kicked off the meeting with the annual OTA reception on Sunday evening at Cafe Tu Tu Tango!

At the reception, we heard from Cynthia Webster, the CEO of Orlando Youth Alliance (OYA). OYA is a local Orlando nonprofit that works to provide a safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth in Central Florida. OYA provides weekly peer-to-peer support groups and also LGBT History & Cultural classes, scholarships, career exploration and mental health referrals. OTA membership raised **$1,055 f**or OYA at the reception this year, and due to matching funds offered by a generous donor to OYA, our contribution to OYA totaled **$2,110!** Thank you so much to those of you who donated!

Finally, we wanted to say a special thanks to all of the OTA donors and sponsors who make the annual reception possible (and the food and drinks free!). We had many donations made by individual OTA members; we are so humbled by your support. Further, the OTA reception has been heavily supported by Gradient and ToxServices for the past 4 years! Having support from both individual OTA members as well as these industry level donors makes this reception possible - **THANK YOU!!!!**

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Financial Report:

Item	Amount
2025 Pre-meeting Balance	**$11,177 ($7,000 from donors)**
2025 Meeting Expenses Post Doc Award ($500); Graduate Student Award ($500); Plaques ($150); Mentoring Event ($250); Reception ($7,106)	**$8,506**
Post 2025 Meeting Balance	**$2,671**
2025 Incoming Membership Dues	**$2,430**
2025-2026 Balance	**$5,101**

Donate to OTA

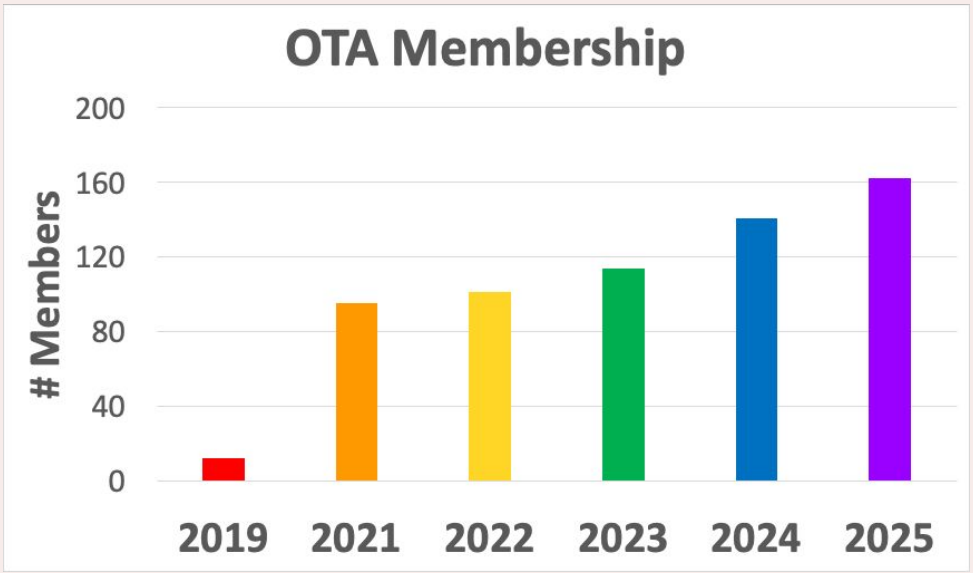
Donations aren't just helpful, they're essential. We quite literally cannot function without them. This work depends on your support to survive!

You can easily **donate directly to OTA** by check or credit card by filling out this form or use the QR code.

Donations are tax deductible.

Donate to OTA:

*If you donate, please email outtoxicologistsandallies@gmail.com the amount of your donation!



OTA continues to grow with 162 current members!

Closing Remarks:

As we close out this edition, we want to thank you for continuing to build a more visible, inclusive, and critically engaged community of LGBTQIA2S+ and allies within our collectively cherished discipline, the toxicological sciences. OTA's work is shaped by your voices, questions, and participation. Whether you're new to this space or have been with us from the start, your presence matters and you are valued!

We always need more hands, more ideas, and more support. If you believe in what OTA is doing, consider becoming a more active member and helping us grow: recruit a colleague, step into a leadership role, or contribute financially, small donations welcomed!

We're especially eager to welcome those who want to take on a more official role in shaping the future of OTA.

Stay connected with us and each other. Show up. Speak up. This work only moves forward if we move it together.

Meg Whittaker, President
Sarah Lacher, Vice President
Cody Smith, VP-Elect
Ashley Brinkman, Junior Councilor
Drake Phelps, Postdoctoral Representative
Catherine Lucey, Graduate Student Representative
Jess Plavicki, Past President
Troy A. Roepke, Interim E-Board Member & 2x Past President

Donate to OTA:

***If you donate, please email outtoxicologistsandallies@gmail.com the amount of your donation!**