Carpe Librum: 
Seize the (YA) Book

Transitioning Teens: 
Why We Can’t Forget the T in the LGBTQ Spectrum
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When I (Pauline) attended the 2014 ALAN Workshop, I attended a panel presentation that included teens—which is somewhat unusual (at least in my experience). What made this panel unique was that two of the teens had transitioned; Katie from male to female and Arin from female to male. As if that wasn’t enough to make this panel stand out, both were accompanied by their respective mothers. For 20 minutes, I sat spellbound by the honesty and emotional telling of the journeys of these young people: intersecting at a trans-support group, dating, and then parting ways. Their story stayed with me, and it resurfaced as I attended the NCTE Annual Convention in 2015 where there was big news about a middle grades novel called George by Alex Gino. In this story, fourth-grader George looks like a boy on the outside but knows she is a girl on the inside. The language used in George is perfect for younger students in helping them grasp the concept of what transgender means and how a person experiences transgender.

What we know is that bullying rates and suicide rates are significantly higher in the LGBTQ community when compared to cisgender teenagers. And, while we are seeing lesbian and gay characters emerge in the field of young adult literature, both as main and secondary characters, the trans* characters are few and far between. The books reviewed here are nonfiction but they do provide us with an important resource: trans* narratives told by the teenagers themselves.

Rethinking Normal: 
A Memoir in Transition
Katie Rain Hill (@KatieRainHill)

This account offered insight into not only Katie’s journey but also the friction within the LGBTQ community. Katie’s account in the “Creating Change” chapter brings to the forefront an oft-ignored reality: that although the LGBTQ community seeks equal rights and acceptance, there is disagreement, even at a fundamental level in the case of certain individuals, as to how those goals can be realized. Furthermore, although the community is recognized as a whole, there is a significant gap between and among LG, B, and T. Katie recalls that when discussion of transgender bathroom privileges arose, a member of the conference vehemently rejected the idea that transgender individuals have the same bathroom freedoms as cisgender students on the grounds that such a movement would ultimately trigger blind homophobia and place gay children in the crosshairs of their heterosexual classmates. Katie’s later exchanges suggest that this conflict is a necessary step to furthering the cause of all individuals within the LGBTQ community. I think it would be worth identifying this division of opinion and how the LGBTQ community produces results from often conflicting ideals.
Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen
Arin Andrews (@arin_andrews)

An important element of this account is the idea of near-authenticity versus total authenticity, particularly in regard to relationships. As Katie did in her book, Arin recalls his relationship with Katie but pays special attention to the conclusion of their romance, stating that Katie’s revelation that she had been dating someone for months behind his back was a betrayal of not only his feelings and his estimation of his own self-worth as a romantic partner, but also his own value as a transgender individual. To be told that the body of a cisgender individual was preferred—even temporarily—implied that there was some greater value in being born cisgender than transgender. Arin’s depression eventually abated and he regained his self-confidence, even while maintaining an awkward friendship with Katie. This idea of cisgender and transgender as total and near authenticity, and as whole and partial value as individuals, should provide for much discussion.

Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out
Susan Kuklin (@susankuklin)

One of the interesting points I encountered here was “love of body,” even though that body may not match up with the transgender individual’s spirit. In the case of Jessy, for instance, he admits that it wasn’t until menstruation that he became uncomfortable with his body. In any other regard, however, he was not at odds with a woman’s body; he says that he treated himself well and did not feel any disgust at being born in a body that did not match his true identity. I feel this is worth focusing on because it signifies the extent to which social norms are impressed upon an individual. In the case of Jessy, the reality of social norms did not begin to weigh him down until puberty; prior to that point, there was no serious conflict, only curiosity and confusion as to why a girl cannot use the boys’ bathroom, or why a girl wanting to practice karate on boys is somehow odd. There is a myth perpetuated in the media that suggests that transgender individuals never feel comfortable in their birth form, and Jessy’s story helps disprove this notion by suggesting that discomfort is derived from social tensions.

Another key point is how social messages, including advertising, reinforce the idea of what is “masculine” and “feminine” and how both transgender and cisgender are exposed to these concepts. In Christina’s story, she states that she enjoyed collecting Barbie dolls not because they were fun to play with but because they had long hair, and Christina (then Matthew) registered that long hair was “inherently” more feminine than masculine. In this instance, social cues had formed her opinions on hairstyle. In high school, Christina attempted to grow her hair out as long as possible, only to be told that school policy dictated that it be kept above the collar. This account provides an insightful look into persistent social expectations, even regarding the primary physical feature that we, as individuals, are capable of altering.

Works Cited

J. Eanan Nagle is a graduate student at West Chester University, where he is pursuing a master’s degree in English literature. His research interests include medieval and early Renaissance literature, comparative mythology, and twentieth-century speculative fiction. Upon graduation, Eanan intends to travel overseas to teach in Ireland, where he holds dual citizenship. Pauline Skowron Schmidt is an assistant professor in English education at West Chester University and an active member of NCTE since 2003. She loves reading YA Literature and teaching! Contact her at peschmidt@wcupa.edu.