

The Portrayal of Trans People in Books for Children and Young Adults

La representación de las personas trans en libros para la infancia
y juventud

La representació de les persones trans en llibres per a infants i
joves

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Abstract

The last twenty years have seen a proliferation of books for young people dealing with trans experience and issues. This paper charts the emergence of transgender fiction for children and young adults, and its development during that period. It will address several questions arising from this phenomenon. How does the representation of trans experience differ when presented for a child readership rather than adults, and for younger children rather than adolescents? How are the representations of gender identity, gender expression and sexuality affected by considerations of audience? What are the tropes (or clichés) of trans fiction, and how have they changed? Whose points of view do the stories represent? Does it matter whether their authors are themselves trans? Is it more possible today than twenty years ago to assume some knowledge in child readers, or must every story “start from scratch”?

There is no single answer to any of these questions, but the article will note some of the trends discernible over a range of texts published in English since the start of the century, and describe some of the challenges in writing texts about trans* experience in the future.

Keywords: Children’s and Youth Literature, Trans Literature, LGTBI Literature

Resumen

Durante los últimos veinte años se ha podido observar una proliferación de libros para jóvenes que tratan la experiencia trans i sus problemas. Este artículo muestra la aparición de la ficción transgénero para un público infantil y juvenil y su desarrollo durante este periodo. Aborda diferentes cuestiones que surgen en este fenómeno. ¿En qué se diferencia la representación de la experiencia trans cuando se presenta para un lector infantil más que para adultos, y para lectores y lectoras más jóvenes que los y las adolescentes? ¿De qué manera afecta a las representaciones de identidad de género, expresión de género y sexualidad respecto a las consideraciones sobre la audiencia? ¿Cuáles son los tropos (o clichés) de la ficción trans y cómo han cambiado? ¿Qué puntos de vista representan las historias? ¿Cuánto importa el hecho de que los autores o autoras sean también trans? ¿Es más posible que se asuman algunos conocimientos en lectores infantiles que hace veinte años o cada historia empieza desde cero?

No hay una única respuesta a cada una de estas preguntas, pero el artículo apuntará algunas de las tendencias que se pueden discernir sobre una gama de textos publicados en inglés desde principio de siglo y describirá algunos de los retos de escribir textos sobre la experiencia trans en el futuro.

Palabras clave: Literatura infantil, literature trans, literatura LGTBI

Resum

Durant els darrers vint anys s'ha vist una proliferació de llibres per a joves que tracten l'experiència trans i els seus problemes. Aquest article mostra l'aparició de la ficció transgènere per a infants i joves i el seu desenvolupament durant aquest període. Aborda diferents qüestions que sorgeixen d'aquest fenomen. Com divergeix la representació de l'experiència trans quan es presenta per a un lector infant més que per a adults, i per a lectors i lectores més joves que els i les adolescents? De quina manera afecta les representacions d'identitat de gènere, expressió de gènere i sexualitat respecte de les consideracions sobre l'audiència? Quins són els trops (o clixés) de la ficció trans i com han canviat? Quins punts de vista representen les històries? Quant importa el fet que els autors o autores siguin també trans? És més possible que avui dia s'assumisquen alguns coneixements en lectors infants que fa vint anys o cada història comença des de zero?

No hi ha una resposta única a cadascuna d'aquestes qüestions, però l'article apuntarà algunes de les tendències discernibles sobre un gama de textos publicats en anglés des del començament de segle i descriurà alguns dels reptes d'escriure textos sobre l'experiència trans en el futur.

Paraules clau: Literatura infantil i juvenil, literatura Trans, Literatura LGTBI

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is simple – to acknowledge the emergence of transgender fiction for children and young adults in the last fifteen years, and to give a brief description of its features and development, in the context of changing attitudes to trans people and trans experience. A chronological list of some of these books is presented in Table 1. Not long ago it would have been feasible to make a complete list, but the proliferation of books on this subject means that this is no longer the case. I will provide an overview of this emerging genre, but will discuss in rather more detail four of the examples: David Walliams' *The Boy in the Dress* (2008), Lisa Williamson's *The Art of Being Normal* (2015) John Boyne's *My Brother's Name is Jessica* (2019), and Jessica Love's *Julián is a Mermaid* (2018). Although all these are Anglophone texts, the last, in particular, offers an opportunity to consider the ways in which themes linguistic, racial and gender diversity can be combined in a Hispanic context.

Most of these books feature children or teens who either transition before the book begins, or contemplate doing so over the course of the story. However, language in this area is always shifting, and the umbrella term “trans” is also – rightly or wrongly – sometimes used to refer to people who are genderqueer or non-binary, to crossdressers, to drag kings and queens, and to intersex people, amongst others, and I have included a few such titles on the table above (they are shaded), in part to highlight the issue of definition. For example, Alyssa Brugman’s *Alex as Well* (2013) is narrated by an intersex girl whose parents decided to raise her as a boy. Intersex people sometimes worry that their identities tend to be conflated in the public mind with trans ones, but there is certainly a degree of overlap in experience in Alex’s wish to be accepted as the girl she knows herself to be and her parents’ attempts to force her to be male. Many trans books describe the difficulty of acquiring hormones to aid physical transition, but in Alex’s case it is her parents who are secretly dosing her with testosterone in order to force her into the shape and gender they have decreed.

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David Levithan’s 2003 novel, *Boy Meets Boy*, is ambiguous in a different way. This book, set in an American town where queerness of various kinds is widely accepted, features a character known as Infinite Darlene, who dresses flamboyantly and uses female pronouns but who is also the quarterback on the school football team. Infinite Darlene is referred to by the novel’s gay narrator as a drag queen, but appears to have undergone a full social transition:

I don’t know when Infinite Darlene and I first became friends. Perhaps it was back when she was still Daryl Heisenberg, but that’s not very likely. Few of us can remember what Daryl Heisenberg was like, since Infinite Darlene consumed him so completely (Levithan, 2003, p. 26).

As someone who adopts the style choices and mannerisms of a drag queen but lives the life of a transitioned trans girl, Infinite Darlene remains an undefined figure – which may or may not have been Levithan’s intention.

More problematic is David Walliams’ middle-grade novel, *The Boy in the Dress* (2008). Walliams’s protagonist, Dennis, loves female fashion and enjoys dressing (and passing) as a girl, but is clear that he is nevertheless a boy. Dennis’s male gender identity is repeatedly stressed (it

is after all *The Boy in the Dress*), and he is delighted when his rather neglectful father finally scoops him onto his shoulders in triumph after the big match, crying “This is my son! This is my boy!” (Walliams, 2008, p. 200). In the book’s final pages Dennis explains his interest in crossdressing simply as “fun” and a kind of “playing,” comparing it to dressing up as Spiderman (pp. 223, 224). When his Sikh friend, Darvesh, lets him try on his turban, he remarks: “On you it’s just a hat. It’s just dressing up, innit?” (p. 93). The parallel with Dennis’s cross-dressing and what that says – or does not say – about his gender, is plain: he does not consider female presentation a fundamental part of his identity. Moreover, at the story’s conclusion almost every male character dresses in female clothes, from Dennis’s football teammates, who do so to express solidarity with him, to his uptight teacher (a secret crossdresser (p. 216)), to the local shopkeeper, who borrows his wife’s sari in order to “fool” Dennis as Dennis had fooled him (p. 225). This is crossdressing as carnivalesque rather than as an expression of gender identity.

Walliams, a lifelong crossdresser, is of course free to write about the experience of a cross-dressing boy, but I find two things troubling here. The first is the book’s inconsistency of tone. Walliams has described the novel as “a wish fulfilment fantasy” (Walliams, 2014); when Dennis sees himself dressed as a girl, the narrator comments: “He felt so happy he wanted to dance. Sometimes you feel things so deeply that words aren’t enough” (pp. 102-103). This and similar passages imply a far more profound engagement than trying on a Spiderman costume as a game, and it makes the novel’s adoption of the language of play and of deception seem inadequate. It is a tension that the book never acknowledges, let alone resolves.

The second problem concerns the experience of the trans children who read Walliams’ book. And read it they will: although *The Boy in the Dress* was a first novel, Walliams was already a television celebrity, known especially as one of the co-stars of the sketch show, *Little Britain* (from 2003). His book was illustrated by long-term Roald Dahl collaborator and former Children’s Laureate Quentin Blake, and launched to some fanfare. Since its publication Walliams has become one of the bestselling children’s writers in the United Kingdom. Indeed, in 2014 a TV version of *The Boy in the Dress* was broadcast on BBC1, the BBC’s main channel, the day after Christmas. For any trans viewers hoping to see their experience represented positively, the book’s promise is sadly undercut by its conclusion, in which Dennis’s crossdressing is presented as no more than a temporary holiday from maleness – or even as an attempt to fool others into thinking he is something he is not. Cisgender (that is, non-trans) readers with no direct experience of trans issues are likely to use this well-known book as a template for understanding transgender children they may encounter. As the teenage trans girl in Lisa Williamson’s *The Art of Being Normal* (2015) confesses nervously: “I’m still a boy in a dress to most people; David

Piper in drag” (Williamson, 2015, p. 337). The popularity of a book called *The Boy in the Dress* is unlikely to help that situation.

In this respect, Walliams’s book provides a strong contrast with Marcus Ewert and Rex Ray’s

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picturebook *10,000 Dresses* (2009). This too is a story of a child who wants to wear dresses and is interested in fashion, who is told sternly by parents and brother that dresses aren’t for boys, and who (like Dennis) eventually finds an encouraging and enabling older girl. However, Ewert and Ray’s story uses female pronouns throughout for young Bailey, does not feel the need to excuse or explain her behaviour, and certainly does not dismiss it as deception or play. This is Walliams’ story done right – at least for a transgender child readership. Jessica Walton’s *Introducing Teddy* (2016) is another successful

example, aimed at younger children, which uses the device of making the trans character a teddy bear. This allows questions of anatomy to be bracketed – who gets to decide on the sex of a teddy bear, after all? – and gender identity to be placed centre-stage.

Julián, the young Afro-Latinx protagonist in Jessica Love’s *Julián is a Mermaid* (2018), is another ambiguous figure. Julián is not identified as a trans child, but his love of mermaids is shared by many trans girls (perhaps because mermaids’ lack of obvious genitalia makes fantasising about them a non-dysphoric experience), to the extent that the United Kingdom’s best-known charity for young trans people and their families is named Mermaids. Travelling on the subway with his *abuela*, Julián is excited to see three women in mermaid costumes on the same train. He fantasises about a mermaid existence, and later declares himself to be a mermaid too, constructing a costume from fronds, flowers and a net curtain, and putting on lipstick. Rather than reprove Julián, his *abuela* offers one of her own necklaces to complete the look, and encourages him to participate in the local mermaid parade (the setting is not identified, but appears to be New York’s Coney Island).

Julián is a Mermaid was widely praised on publication, not only because of its positive portrayal of gender self-expression and exploration, but for its unmarked Afro-Latinx setting. Julián and his *abuela* use Spanish words, but these are not marked as “exotic” by being italicised; like Julián himself, they are simply accepted as part of the rich variety of the city’s life. It is a pity, then, that the British edition of the book entirely erases its Latin context. In Britain, Julián loses his

diacritic to become Julian, while his *abuela* changes to Nana. Instead of addressing him as *mijo* (Love, 2018a, n.p.) she calls him “honey” (Love, 2018b, n.p.) – a choice suggesting that the British publisher has implicitly retained the American setting of the book (“honey” is not a common endearment in the United Kingdom), and has chosen to excise only its Latin elements. Such changes would be disappointing in any context, but are especially so in a book clearly intended as a celebration of diversity of all kinds, whether in gender, race or language.

Author	Title	Date	Country of Publication	Age	Narrator	Genre
David Levithan	<i>Boy Meets Boy</i>	2003	USA	YA	1(C)	Novel
Julie Anne Peters	<i>Luna</i>	2004	USA	YA	1(C)	Novel
Ellen Wittlinger	<i>Parrotfish</i>	2007	USA	YA	1(T)	Novel
David Walliams	<i>The Boy in the Dress</i>	2008	UK	MG	3	Novel
Brian Katcher	<i>Almost Perfect</i>	2009	USA	YA	1(C)	Novel
Marcus Ewert and Rex Ray	<i>10,000 Dresses</i>	2009	USA	ER	3	Picture book
Cris Beam	<i>I am J</i>	2011	USA	YA	3	Novel
Kirstin Cronn-Mills	<i>Beautiful Music for Ugly Children</i>	2012	USA	YA	1(T)	Novel
Rachel Gold	<i>Being Emily</i>	2012	USA	YA	1(T)	Novel
Alyssa Brugman	<i>Alex as Well</i>	2013	Australia	YA	1(T/Inters ex)	Novel
David Levithan	<i>Two Boys Kissing</i>	2013	USA	YA	1(C)	Novel
Ami Polonsky	<i>Gracefully Grayson</i>	2014	USA	MG	1(T)	Novel
Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings	<i>I am Jazz</i>	2014	USA	ER	1(T)	Picture book
Katie Rain Hill	<i>Rethinking Normal</i>	2014	USA	YA	1(T)	Memoi r
Arin Andrews	<i>Some Assembly Required</i>	2014	USA	YA	1(T)	Memoi r
Simon Packham	<i>Only We Know</i>	2015	UK	YA	1(T)	Novel
Lisa Williamson	<i>The Art of Being Normal</i>	2015	UK	YA	1(T)	Novel
Alex Gino	<i>George</i>	2015	USA	MG	3	Novel
Jessica Walton	<i>Introducing Teddy</i>	2016	UK/USA	ER	3	Picture Book
Jessica Love	<i>Julián is a Mermaid</i>	2018	USA	ER	3	Picture book
John Boyne	<i>My Brother's Name is Jessica</i>	2019	UK	MG	1(C)	Novel

Key:
Age: YA= young adult, MG= middle grade, ER=Early Reader
Narrator: 1(T) = first-person trans narrator, 1 (C) = first-person cisgender narrator, 3 = third-person narrator.

Table 1. Children’s and Young Adult Books with Trans Content

2. Readership

Who are the readers of these books? There is no one answer: rather, these books address several overlapping groups. One consists of trans children and teens seeking representation of people like themselves. Isolation is a huge problem for trans children, especially if they live in a family or town where the dominant attitude towards trans people is hostile. The internet has been transformative in terms of providing access to both community and information, and in large cities there may be some face-to-face support, but it can be very helpful for trans children to know that they are not alone. Books can help provide this reassurance.

This group of readers intersects with others. One comprises trans children and teens seeking factual information. Many of these books include, either in the narratives themselves or in author's notes, information about resources, helplines, medical protocols, hormones, surgical interventions and so on. Since there is a lot of misinformation on these matters, not least on the internet, it is important to make reliable information available. Also relevant are trans children and teens seeking reassurance about their own futures. For people contemplating a difficult course of action – transition, or coming out to others or themselves – literature can be both a useful resource and a powerful way of imagining a possible future.

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For such readers, literature has a difficult line to tread. The challenges involved in being trans need to be acknowledged, but people also need reassurance that things can get better, and a vision of what a better life might actually look like. Consequently, most of these books end on a relatively positive note. Imagining a positive future can also be a first step to making it happen. As David Levithan wrote in connection with *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), a book set in a town where the existence of a sizable gay and queer population is simply an accepted fact:

You don't have to write a book in order to reflect reality. You can also write a book to create reality. Most teen readers, I found, understood this, because they were living their lives to create reality, not merely reflect it. (Levithan, 2013a)

In addition to trans readers, books may be sought out by cisgender friends, relations, and socially concerned people in general, seeking to understand the nature of trans experience. Numerically, indeed, this is likely to be the largest group, and for a commercial publisher it cannot be ignored. This does mean that to an extent every book has to start from first principles, and can take no

knowledge or experience for granted. Every trans book is a “teaching moment” – and while this may be a valuable function, it does make it hard to move trans narratives on from the tropes of coming out, disclosure to cisgender characters, and so on. As understanding of trans issues increases over time, it is to be hoped that this will change, but meanwhile the educative function of such literature for cisgender readers is in partial tension with its usefulness to trans readers, and perhaps also with its potential literary quality – because, of course, the final group of readers consists of anyone who wishes to read a good book. Trans literature is, in fact, literature – and all the aesthetic canons concerning plot, dialogue, style, and so on, apply to it as much as to any other kind.

3. The Development of the Genre

Even in the short span of this genre’s life, the dominant trans narrative tropes have been evolving. In order to understand the trajectory of this development, an analogy with fiction and film about gay characters seems relevant. Stories featuring gay characters can be said to have gone through three overlapping stages:

1. The gay character is a tragic figure (not usually the protagonist). Sometimes the tragedy of the gay character will teach the straight protagonists important lessons about life and tolerance that they can take forward into their future.
2. A gay protagonist wins happiness after overcoming prejudice and other difficulties
3. One or more characters happen to be gay – but their sexuality is not the crux of the story

It should be stressed that the numbers one to three are developmental rather than chronological: it is possible for narratives of all three kinds

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to be published at the same time. With that proviso, I suggest that this trajectory transfers very well to trans narratives. Stage One trans narratives are still abundant in fiction, whether for children or adults. In adult fiction and film, the Stage One trans character’s story usually terminates in death. An example is Banana Yoshimoto’s breakout novella of 1988, *Kitchen*, or the 2015 film *The Danish Girl*, based on David Ebershoff’s 2000 novel of the same name. The narrative may be more or less sympathetic to the trans character, but that character’s ultimate

function is to facilitate the emotional growth of a cisgender protagonist, and very often (as,

notably, in *The Danish Girl*) their death conveniently clears the way for the protagonist to move on with their life.

Young adult and children's fiction have so far refrained from killing off major trans characters, but this trajectory is nonetheless familiar in a more attenuated form. An example is the American writer Julie Anne Peters's 2004 novel, *Luna*, the first unambiguously trans novel for young people. The story is narrated by the younger, cisgender sister of Luna, a trans girl. It is a broadly sympathetic narrative, but at the conclusion of the novel, Luna is forced from the family home to start a new life with a new identity in a different city. This is, in effect, a symbolic death – although it was once also the path once recommended by psychiatrists in the USA to people transitioning, the assumption being that society would never tolerate a person known to be trans.

Luna stands at the beginning of the trans YA genre, but Brian Katcher's 2009 *Almost Perfect* is still a Stage One book, which ends with the transgender character hospitalized by a transphobic attack, then moving to a new city without any kind of support, and even deciding to detransition. More recently still, John Boyne's problematically titled children's book, *My Brother's Name is Jessica*, published in 2019, presents a very similar trajectory. The story is told by Jessica's younger brother, who is unable to accept that his adored elder brother Jason has transitioned. Their politician parents are still more unaccepting, and Jessica leaves home to stay with a more tolerant relative. In the book's climactic scene, when their mother's political ambitions seem likely to be ruined by the scandal of having (and then rejecting) a trans child, Jessica turns up at a press conference dressed as Jason, with several day's growth of beard. Effectively, she detransitions, albeit temporarily, to spare the blushes of her family.

One can only speculate as to whether Boyne, who is gay, would have written a book in which the central gay character decides to be straight at the end, and turns up with a girl on his arm; or whether a book in which a gay character decides to become straight would have won a Stonewall Book Award from the American Library Association, as Katcher's did. That books such as these are still being written, published and sometimes acclaimed as supportive of trans people, is some measure of how far literature in this area still has to go.

Stage One books are still very much with us. Stage Three books, in which a major character's being trans is just part of the landscape of the fiction, have yet to make a significant appearance. Even characters whose experience is relatively optimal, such as Jazz in *I am Jazz* (2014) and Avery in *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), who enjoy parental support and access to medical care, still have to cope with difficult issues that are presented as central to the story. Jazz Jennings, for example,

was for a time banned from playing soccer and forced to use the boys' toilet; Avery too worries about using public toilets and is concerned how his romantic partner will react to being told of his trans status.

Most trans-related books fall squarely into Stage Two. They do not end in tragedy, but much of their action centres on the practical and mental challenges involved in being trans. These include body dysphoria; access to medical care; the practicalities of hormones, surgery, binders, prosthetics, and so on; secrecy and coming out; rejection and/or acceptance by family, partners, friends, school; prejudice and bullying; accessing sex-specific facilities (such as toilets) and organizations (refuges, sports teams); and self-harm and suicidal thoughts. These are the standard fare of Stage Two novels, the plots of which typically chart the negotiation of such obstacles in the context of a life otherwise presented as relatively mundane.

Lisa Williamson's *The Art of Being Normal* can stand as a representative example of Stage Two fiction. It has two first-person narrators: David (later Kate), and Leo. Williamson creates a plausible school setting and story, but the book feels fairly schematic. David and Leo between them are clearly designed to cover as many of the issues I have listed as possible. One is a trans girl, the other a trans boy; one is just beginning to contemplate coming out, the other has already transitioned. Over the course of the book both work to overcome their own fears and the resistance of those around them, and the conclusion combines optimism with realistic restraint. Readers will pick up much information about puberty blockers, binders and the requirement for two years' "real life experience" which is part of the medical gatekeeping regime for trans people in the United Kingdom. The book navigates this terrain quite realistically, and is clearly well researched: in short, it is a book that potentially fulfils many of the functions of trans literature identified earlier in this article. To judge (as one rough metric) by the many positive reviews on Amazon and GoodReads, it has clearly found an audience, too.

The Art of Being Normal has some problematic aspects, however – neither by any means unique to this book. One relates to the way the trans characters are positioned as "other" by the plot structure. When mentioning that Leo was a trans boy, I might have added "Spoiler alert!" because this fact is not revealed until almost 200 pages in, well over halfway through the novel. In fact, it is revealed twice: first when he tells the girl he likes – much to her shock – and then again when he takes off his shirt in front of David, revealing a binder across his chest – much to David's shock. In both cases, the moment signals the climactic end of the chapter.

Plot twists are an intoxicating narrative device, but in a book such as this they can also be a way of subjecting trans people to an othering cis gaze. The moment of cognitive dissonance when the physical reality of a trans body and cisnormative expectations about what bodies *should* be clash is both objectifying and dangerous. The *locus classicus* is the scene in Neil Jordan's 1992 film, *The Crying Game*, in which the hero becomes intimate with the beautiful Dil. The camera follows his lustful gaze slowly down her body, only to stop short at a penis. The producer of *The Crying Game*, Stephen Woolley, has emphasised the importance of this shock moment to the film's success. Speaking on BBC Radio 4's *The Film Programme* in February 2017, he recalled:

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We started the campaign [not to reveal the "twist"] in the UK. I wrote a personal note to all the film critics when the film was released, and I think 99.9% of them kept it quiet... That twist became part of the reason the Americans flocked to see the film. At the height of its popularity in New York I used to slip into the back of cinemas, just for the moment, just for the revealing moment, because the audience would go crazy. ... Obviously, it did work as a sort of hook for the film. (*The Film Programme*, 2017)

In *The Crying Game*, that revealing moment is the trigger for violence and extended vomiting on the part of the cisgender main character. Vomit is also the reaction of the boy who narrates Katcher's *Almost Perfect* when he learns that the girl he made out with is trans: "On my hands and knees, I vomited all over the rubberized surface of the track" (102). Sam Waver, the narrator of *My Brother's Name is Jessica*, has a similar reaction to the discovery that Jessica's secret has got out: "I charged out of the room, leaving the sound of laughter behind me, racing towards the boys' toilets, where I flung myself inside a cubicle, locking the door just in time before I threw up the entire contents of my breakfast into the bowl" (50). Even Brian Griffin, the dog from the US cartoon, *Family Guy*, vomits for a full thirty seconds on discovering that he has slept with a trans woman (MacFarlane, 2010). Such scenes are toxic combinations of transphobia and homophobia: not only are trans women not seen as women, but the realization that they are "really" men, and that the heterosexual protagonist has therefore experienced same-sex attraction, is seen as a natural cue for extended vomiting.

The Art of Being Normal is nothing like that extreme. David's reaction on finding that Leo is trans is to say in a dazed voice: "You're a girl?". In real life it has often been the cue for assault and even murder (Bettcher, 2007). Nor is the law always the trans person's friend here. In recent years, several young British trans men have served time in jail and been put on the Sex Offenders Register because they did not disclose their trans status to their consensual partners (Sharpe, 2015). The violence seen in *The Crying Game* has often been replicated in real life, and the so-called "trans panic" defence has been seriously extended as mitigation for the murder of trans women (Woods et al., 2016).

Naturally, this is a sensitive issue for many trans people, and its transformation into an exoticizing narrative revelation calculated to shock and thrill cisgender readers is in my view hard to justify, no matter how effective a "twist" it provides. Williamson's novel is far from being the worst offender in this respect, however: it is, for example, far less exploitative than Simon

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Packham's *Only We Know* (2015), published the same year, which drops hints about a dark and perhaps criminal secret in the protagonist Lauren's past throughout the story, only to reveal the fact that she has transitioned and is trying to start a new life in a new school on page 220 of a 230-page book. If such a scene could be managed so as to shockingly expose, not the trans character's "real" sex, but rather the cisnormative prejudices and assumptions in play (rather like the revelation of Tyke Tiler's sex in Gene Kemp's 1977 classic, *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*), it might have value. I have yet to see it written in that way.

My other main reservation about Williamson's novel concerns a question of omission, or perhaps of narrowness. *The Art of Being Normal's* transgender protagonists are both straight and gender-typical, which may lead a reader to identify gender identity with an adherence to conventional gender and sexual roles, perpetuating an unfortunate myth and doing scant justice to the variety of transgender experience. Contrast the character Avery in Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing*, a gay trans boy who likes to dye his hair pink:

I know, strange color choice, right? For a boy born as a girl who wants to be seen as a boy. But think about it—it just shows how arbitrary gender is. ... If you free yourself from all the stupid arbitrary shit that society controls us with, you feel more free, and if you feel more free, you can be happier. (Levithan, 2013b, pp. 65-66)

Williamson's book really is about the art of being normal – a normality pictured in very conventional terms. However, no one book can do everything, and there is beginning to be a rich enough ecosystem of books in this genre that it no longer needs to.

4. The Question of Authorship

Of the writers on the list at the beginning of this article, several fall outside heterosexual and cissexual norms – Alex Gino is genderqueer, Williams is a crossdresser, David Levithan and John Boyne are gay – but none of the fiction writers has actually transitioned. Only the three teenage authors, Jazz Jennings, Arin Andrews and Katie Rain Hill, are transsexual, and their books are all personal memoirs, the genre through which trans authors have traditionally presented their take on trans experience, when they have written at all.

Does the absence of transgender authors of transgender children's fiction matter? Some of the

There are of course dangers in cisgender authors writing about trans lives and ventriloquizing trans voices. The biggest is that of fetishizing trans people and appropriating their experience, something that the ubiquity of transphobic tropes in public discourse makes it hard to avoid.

authors listed in the table at the beginning of this article have a professional interest in the subject. Cris Beam was the author of an academic book on trans children (Beam, 2007) before she wrote *I am J*, and Lisa Williamson worked as an administrator at the Tavistock Clinic, which specializes in treating young trans people, before she wrote *The Art of Being Normal*. Most, though, are writers by profession. For them, part of the attraction of writing about trans experience no doubt lies in the framework it offers through which to explore questions about one's embodied and gendered condition, about the relationship between self-

perception and the perception of others, and about the various kinds of gender performance in which all of us are perpetually engaged. This in itself is unobjectionable, in my view. Empathy, imagination, and other kinds of experience can all be brought to the task by cisgender authors.

There are of course dangers in cisgender authors writing about trans lives and ventriloquizing trans voices. The biggest is that of fetishizing trans people and appropriating their experience, something that the ubiquity of transphobic tropes in public discourse makes it hard to avoid. It is remarkable, too, how few of these books make a sustained attempt to tackle what is perhaps most interesting and elusive aspect of being a gendered being: gender identity itself. We know that Lisa Williamson's David, for example, "feels like a girl," but not what this means, nor how it differs from or goes beyond body dysphoria and a preference for traditionally feminine activities and clothing. That, however, is a subject which may indeed require an author who has

experienced the dissonance of finding themselves embedded, and embodied, in the system of cultural, social and physical gender in a way that feels wrong – indeed unbearable – at the most fundamental level.

5. Conclusion

Even the partial list of novels, picturebooks and memoirs that I have mentioned in this article should be sufficient to give some indication of the increasing breadth and depth of literature on this topic available for children of every age group. I have been critical of various individual texts: misleading or partial information and objectifying plot tropes are all too common, and there continues to be a sense that, in order to be published in a world where general awareness of trans issues is still relatively minimal, every new venture requires a reinvention of the wheel. However, while the picture is not one of unimpeded progress, the general trajectory of books for and about trans children has been upwards, borne in large part on a gradually increasing tide of public understanding of trans issues in general. None of this progress is secure or uncontested, however, and the need for literature that creates, rather than merely reflecting, reality, as Levithan puts it, remains pressing.

Most of all, I would like to see trans authors to find a way to write about trans experience in fiction, in a way that is authentic without being narrowly confessional – that breaks beyond being an “issues”-driven book, into the third of the three stages I identified earlier; and speaks to trans experience from the inside. For all their various strengths, none of the books I have discussed here is that novel; but then, that novel has yet to be written.

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