

Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out

Susan Kuklin

Candlewick Press (Feb 11, 2014)

Hardcover \$22.99 (192pp)

978-0-7636-5611-9

Intimate personal stories and photos of transgender teenagers invite discussion of the gender continuum.

Most people struggle to find their place in the world and with identity issues. This is even more difficult for transgender individuals who do not fall into the category of either female or male. Susan Kuklin's book of photo essays, *Beyond Magenta*, explains how gender, sexual orientation, and identity itself are complex and multilayered. Six gender neutral or transgender young adults explain their lives via photos and interviews, highlighting people who do not fit into traditional societal norms.

Though the book definitely focuses on what it is like to grapple with gender identity and sexual orientation, the photo essays also touch on the teens' passions and interests: from soccer and music to attending prom and going to college. Kuklin could have simply summarized their stories; instead, she allowed the young adults to speak for themselves. The interviewees have agency because they are not objectified or pitied. The photographs feel intimate, like those in a family album. There are before and after images that portray the genesis of fully realizing one's true identity, and there are photos of the youths embracing their loved ones. These teens do not avert their gazes, they have worked hard for empowerment.

Kuklin organizes the book using everything from direct quotes and summaries to photos and even poems and short plays. The author understands that different stories need different frames. A glossary provides helpful definitions to better explain what it means to be "intersex" or how "FTM" (female-to-male) describes "a person assigned female at birth but who identifies as male; a trans man." This ensures even someone new to the gender continuum or transgender world can access the subject matter.

Kuklin is bold when discussing sex reassignment, male privilege, and sexual orientation. People unfamiliar with such topics may feel uncomfortable with the bold language or confused about using pronouns like "they" instead of "he" or "she." However, the glossary, personal stories, and photographs may help put the reader at ease.

Kuklin's photo essays demystify the transgender experience. The teenagers are allowed to speak about their struggles with gender, sexuality, family, and finding a place in a world that often asks people to be one thing or another. Like the gender continuum, the six young adults have different experiences, personalities, and viewpoints. Hearing from people like Cameron and Jessy makes the trans world more personal.

LISA BOWER (Spring 2014)

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