

Identify

Lesley Choyce

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Two teen outsiders become unlikely friends and, ultimately, allies, in Lesley Choyce's well-written and compulsively readable *Identity*.

A year ago, Gabriella had long hair and dressed like the other girls. Now she's cut her hair short, wears jeans and flannel shirts, and wants to be called Gabe. When she finds Ethan hiding from class bullies between two overflowing dumpsters, she pulls him out and takes him to her favorite place of refuge: an old graveyard. Her explanation: "It's full of people, but not one of them will give you shit."

Ethan has problems of his own. Quarreling parents and a dad who drinks too much have him escaping into black-market meds. At first, Gabe seems almost too pulled together to be true—cool, sardonic, impervious to comments on her new look. By contrast, Ethan is hypersensitive to jeering and overwhelmed by a sense of inadequacy. But when Gabe's well-meaning parents coerce her into seeing a counselor who brings up the possibility of gender reassignment, the hairline cracks in Gabe's cool façade widen into crevices. In wanting to help his newfound friend, Ethan finds he's stronger than he thinks, and the two become allies in trying to thwart those who torment them.

While the solution that ultimately defeats the bullies is anticlimactic and a bit too easy to be true, it hardly matters. When Gabe visits, her people skills allow Ethan to see both parents in a different light. And while Ethan's previous resolutions to stop taking pills proved futile, his realization that he can't help Gabe if he's in a drug-induced haze proves a reason worth going straight for.

While both teens make progress in the story, there's no fairy-tale ending. Both still have growing to do and issues to resolve, and this helps make the book uncommonly powerful. Choyce's refusal to pigeonhole his characters makes them into people most readers will easily care about.

SUSAN WAGGONER (LGBTQ+ 2017)

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