

You Can't Share Just Some of the Chapters . . .

► CJ BOTT

When I was first asked to write this article, I started thinking about what I felt needed to be included. It began with the interview with Jazz Jennings, which was offered by Crown Books, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House.

Then, I knew a bibliography would have to be as inclusive as possible, and there had to be a list of terms. Finally, the section I hoped for the most was one that would contain other teen voices, and that magically fell into place. I met several times with three teens whose own words are shared below. The list of terms morphed into the "Words That Matter" at the end of the article, words that these teens felt were important, with their definitions.

cjb: *Let us begin. Please introduce yourselves.*

Blue: I'm sixteen years old. I'm a junior in high school. I am a gay, cisgender woman. It's really important for me that members of the LGBT+ community who are my age are able to learn about their identities and the LGBT+ community safely.

Grey: I am sixteen years old and in the eleventh grade in the same high school. I am an agender person, which means I do not have any gender at all. My dream is for all people to be able to explore their own identities and feel confident in who they are.

Felix: I'm seventeen years old, and I'm a senior at the same high school as the other participants. I'm a transgender male and, in roughly a year, I hope to be in college studying psychology. I hope that this [article] reaches at least one person, one teen, one kid out there looking for answers. I may not have them all, but I have a few to help discover the rest.

cjb: *Blue, Grey, and Felix, would you each be willing to share at what age you realized this?*

Felix: Like many people of the transgender community, I had a feeling that something just wasn't quite right, but I also knew that I was a boy. I didn't question what I knew to be true in my heart until someone told me that I should. And that's when things got a little complicated for me. I would hang out with the boys and we would wrestle, yell at girls, and play in the dirt. That's what I knew, so that's all I did. There was just something about me that never really connected with being a female. Middle school was

really hard for me. That was when reality kind of smacked me in the face: I hit the wrong puberty—I started a menstrual cycle. (I was wrapped up in being a boy so I stayed away from anything that had the word "girl" or the color pink in it!) You can imagine the sheer horror I felt when I thought I was dying because blood left my body from "downstairs." Sometime after that, I did, in fact, discover what was actually happening to me and that was: I had a uterus which was squeezing me from the inside, trying to kill me once a month, and I started growing some things in the chest area which were not pecs . . . a devastating moment for any fourteen-year-old boy.

I was confused all the time. I remember feeling so inherently wrong about who I was and why I felt the way I felt. I couldn't talk to my family because being a POC—being black—things like being transgender didn't happen! I couldn't even tell my parents about my anxiety or depression. I just wanted to be a boy and I couldn't.

I started researching my gender identity when I was fifteen, and by then, I had already claimed being gay because I figured that would be an easier segue to coming out as trans, and it was in some ways. It took a lot of time for me to come to terms with who I am because I spent so long pretending to be someone I wasn't in order to make other people comfortable.

Blue: I went to an all-girls school for middle school. This confused things for me because my friends and I weren't really around boys on a regular basis, so I kind of had boys, boyfriends, and that whole mess as this abstract concept in my head. When I was in seventh grade, I started feeling attraction to some of my classmates, which was scary to me.

There was this girl who would say she knew who in our class was a lesbian, and it honestly felt a bit like the witch trials or something, except we were in the gym locker rooms. I'd just sit in a corner and hope she didn't say my name. I switched to the public high school in ninth grade. I'd talked to two or three close

friends and told them I was bisexual—I “dated” a couple of guys in eighth grade, and I thought the reason I didn’t think they were as attractive as some of my girlfriends was because the girls were teenagers—I figured I’d start thinking guys were hot when I was in college. I went through identifying as bisexual, and then pansexual, and finally, last year, I realized that gay felt right to me. So, here I am.

Grey: When I was in middle school, I knew for sure that I was not a girl. It never was right for me. I did not feel right when people called me a girl. I did not feel comfortable calling myself a girl. I tried calling myself a boy instead, because I did not know that any other genders existed; however, being a boy did not fit me either. Throughout my life, I had always just been *me*. Deep down, I knew that I was neither a boy nor a girl. Around the time I entered high school, I learned that there is a broad spectrum of genders. I identify with the agender label because it reflects the way I have felt about my gender all of my life. I finally realize that there is nothing bad about not fitting into the gender identities that people see me as. I feel much stronger being myself now that I have confidence in my identity.

cjb: *Why do you feel this article is important?*

Grey: Libraries and librarians have the opportunity to give all students the resources to understand and feel confident in their gender identities. Gender diversity exists in all communities. A diverse library gives each reader a chance to explore and excel, no matter what their gender.

Gender includes a broad spectrum of identities; however, the rich history of gender diversity is invisible to most people living in the United States today.

Here are some examples of gender diversity around the globe:

- The fa’afafine people of Samoa are neither men nor women. They manifest both masculine and feminine traits.
- The hijra people of the Indian subcontinent embody feminine traits and are recognized as a distinct third gender.
- The sekhet gender in ancient Egypt was unique from the male and female genders of the time.
- The two-spirit people of native North American communities have both masculine and feminine traits. They take on distinct and respected roles in their communities.

Felix: I am a transgender man. When I discovered my identity, all I could do was just read and listen. Not only was I searching for more intel into who I was, but also about what do I do next? I made this life-changing discovery about myself. . . . Great . . . so, what do I do now? Books, articles, blogs, etc., were a really big part of shaping my identity.

Blue: Libraries were always super important to me while I was growing up. In middle school, my teacher advisor was the librarian, and I spent enormous amounts of time there. She was an important figure in my life, because she accepted me and my friends’ choices—name changes, book choices. Access to information is incredibly important when you’re trying to figure out who you are and how you identify. Libraries and librarians are

uniquely equipped to provide that access.

cjb: *What do librarians need to know . . . particularly about the use of pronouns?*

Blue: Pronouns and gender presentation are an integral part of a student’s identity, but do not totally define a person. Using a student’s preferred pronoun not only respects identity but affirms it. A lot of the criticism toward picking pronouns and sexual identities used by the LGBT community focuses on the idea that students are putting themselves in boxes by labeling themselves. People seem to think that choosing an identity means students are limiting themselves, or that it’s something they’re not yet old enough to do, or that they’re just trying to be “special.” There’s a difference between choosing your own identity and someone doing it for you. Choosing your pronouns and how you identify allows you to take control.

Felix: The very minute that we—those seeking guidance about gender and sexuality—step through the library doors and enter the “world of information,” you, librarians, are a part of the story. Our stories.

Blue: As I’m writing this, it’s Banned Books Week—and on the list of the top ten most-banned books in 2016, four involve LGBT content, and two of the top five are about trans issues. **I Am Jazz** by Jazz Jennings, a teen transgender activist, is number three, and number four is **Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out** by Susan Kukli. Banning LGBT content essentially puts a ban on LGBT identities. It condemns and invalidates LGBT teens’ feelings and experiences.

Felix: I agree with Blue. There are still some hardcore conservative librarians who censor and are ripping out pages and whiting out part of books that take away from what is a critical turning point in the book. You, the librarian, can’t choose to just share certain chapters—you have to share the whole book. And more in depth to what Blue is saying in regards to transgender books specifically—these books are home to me.

It makes me think of this LGBT representation:

LGBT

It shows the four letters next to each other in the order that you’d normally see them, but what is different is that the G is this huge letter and takes up a lot of space. To the left, L is the second biggest letter and is a bit smaller than the G but clearly, it’s meant to stick out. Then farther over is the B, and it’s standard size text, far less noticeable than the other two letters before it. Lastly, there is the T and it’s so small, like when you get your eyes checked at the doctor’s office, and you have to read this small line of letters. That’s exactly what the text looks like. What is that supposed to mean? How am I supposed to feel?

I don’t want to take anything away from other identities, but as trans people, every day is a fight. To be ourselves and feel good about it is a constant struggle. So, when I hear that things, like a banned book called **I Am Jazz**, are not available to read—it’s unfair. I think it would be really helpful if we all remember to be good humans.

Blue: I think the whole idea of representation is what’s hardest to explain, especially to people who have gone their whole lives seeing themselves represented in books, on TV, in comics, movies,



WORDS THAT MATTER

Blue, Felix, and Grey want readers to know these terms and what they mean to them.

Agender: Someone who identifies as having no gender or being without a gender identity.

Bisexual: Someone who experiences sexual and romantic attraction to both males and females.

Cisgender: Someone who identifies with the gender they were designated at birth.

Gender Binary: The gender system in which gender and sex are classified as two distinct forms: male and female.

Gender Expression: The way someone presents themselves.

Gender Fluid: Someone whose gender identity fluctuates.

Gender Identity: Inner perception of one's self.

Gender Non-conforming: Someone whose behavior or self-expression does not conform with societal expectations for their gender.

Intersex: Someone whose sexual anatomy—hormone levels, genitalia, secondary sexual characteristics—doesn't fit the typical definitions of "male" or "female."

LGBT+: Quick reference for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and all other presentations.

Nongendered/gender neutral: An identity term that describes not having a gender, agender.

Pansexual: Someone who is romantically attracted to another person regardless of their gender identity

Trans*: Quick reference for all transgender identities.

Transgender: Someone whose gender identity does not align with the assigned gender at born.

Translatinx: Combines gender identity and culture—Trans and Latinx (the gender-neutral alternative to Latino, Latina, and Latin@).

Transphobia: Prejudice and extreme dislike against transgender people.

Two-Spirit: Two-spirit people of native North American communities have both masculine and feminine traits.

FOR MORE TERMS

Heartland Trans* Wellness Group: Trans* and Queer/LGBTQPIA Terminology. <http://transwellness.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Trans-and-Queer-Terms-HTWG.pdf>

Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Gender Neutral Pronouns. <http://web.mit.edu/trans/GenderNeutralPronouns.pdf>

magazines, and the media in general. People will say, "Oh, but why can't you relate to [insert straight cisgender character here], they're human. I'm sure you've had the same emotions as them, what's the problem?" The problem is that when you create a fictional world and populate it almost entirely with white, straight, cisgender characters, you're basically saying that those other identities don't exist or that they don't matter.

One of the most common statistics for "How many people are LGBT?" is one in ten, which Albert Kinsey gave as an estimate during his studies in the early 1900s of human sexuality. Today, that number has been debated—most polling tends to give the percentage at around five percent, or one in twenty, and there are tons of issues in counting people this way. It's a categorical variable, depending entirely on self-assessment, etc. Not only that,

but there's a difference between identification and experience—people who don't feel like they fit in the gender binary may not identify as trans, and people who have had same-sex attraction or experiences may still identify as heterosexual.

If we take the earlier one in ten number to be true, it has interesting implications. For example, take the Marvel movies lineup: Iron Man, Captain America, Black Widow, Hawkeye, Thor, Hulk, Scarlet Witch, Bucky Barnes, Spider Man, and Black Panther. That's ten characters: it is, therefore, statistically probable that in real life, one would identify as a member of the LGBT community. So, why not? Representation is validating, it makes you feel good, it gives you someone who is like you—and if that person is successful and happy, then it makes you think that you too can be successful and happy.

cjb: *Do you believe gender is assigned by nature or a doctor or simply happenstance? Or is it chosen by the individual based on inner feelings? Or does gender choose the person?*

Felix: *Gender is a spectrum. It's fluid. You can be whatever you feel fits your identity at any time. Gender and sexuality aren't a contract, not a lock that you throw away the key to, and it is not definite.*

Grey: *Gender is about how you feel inside and what makes you comfortable. Gender identity is a tool we use to make sense of the way we feel in society. There are no rules except for the ones we write. We all can take a look inside ourselves to discover who we really are. Nobody can assign your gender except for you. ■*

RESOURCES

Bilerico Project, The: The Top 20 Most Important LGBT Figures in History. http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2011/08/the_top_20_most_important_lgbt_figures_in_history.php

Demographics of Sexual Orientation. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_sexual_orientation

LGBT Demographics of the United States. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_demographics_of_the_United_States

List of Transgender People. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_transgender_people

Western Perception of Homosexuality Versus the Rest of the World. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_sexual_orientation#Modern_survey_results

cj bott, teacher and writer, loves bringing great books and great people together.



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