

Alex Gino Invites Younger Readers Into a Complicated and Rewarding Conversation About Gender

George, by Alex Gino

We first meet Melissa on a day when she locks herself into a bathroom so that she can sneak a peek at her favorite magazines. The fourth-grader pours over pages filled with the kind of stereotypical content generally aimed at preteen girls: articles on makeup, photospreads of haircuts and bathing suits, advice on getting a boy's attention. But Melissa isn't a stereotypical preteen girl. The girl searching for her identity among the beach pictures and makeup advice was assigned male at birth--and everyone in her life sees her as a boy named George. It's a complicated situation for Melissa--and of course, for young readers.

If younger readers are to explore such a complex topic, it helps to have an empathetic guide. Author Alex Gino provides the kind of knowing but loving voice that young people respond to. They* have a real gift for remembering and conveying the emotional detail of being young. The confusing reactions of adults, the cruel and pointed classroom comments, the rituals of friendship, and the centrality of food, games, and school activities all contribute to a genuine and relatable depiction of childhood. Gino creates a warm but plainspoken narrative voice that young people can trust--a critical strategy when, for many young readers, the novel's content will be well outside the boundaries of comfort.

Gino's depiction of Melissa's relationships with her mother, brother, and best friend are note-perfect, never straying into either implausible depth on the one hand or cartoonish disrespect for the emotional capacities of children on the other. Her characters are nuanced, exhibiting a realistic mixture of strength and frailty. These are characters we understand and root for, who mirror our own prejudices and failings and who inspire us to discover our own better natures.

This is not to say that *George* is flawless. But it's more than likely that its flaws--the use of *Charlotte's Web* as an intertextual reference point, Melissa's use of public shaming as a way to "stand up" for herself--are ones that younger readers will not notice at all. Because there are very good reasons for this novel's success: *George* boasts a strong structure, relatable characters, engaging dialogue, and vivid description and images. The novel's voice is by turns empathetic and humorous--sometimes even wry--and always inviting. Readers will find themselves speeding through the book to find out what happens and cheering when at last Melissa is able to share the truth of her identity with those who matter most.

*Alex Gino's pronouns are them/they.