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I Am J



Synopsis

A powerful and inspiring story about a transgender teen's struggle to find his own path -- and love his true self. J had always felt different. He was certain that eventually everyone would understand who he really was: a boy mistakenly born as a girl. Yet as he grew up, his body began to betray him; eventually J stopped praying to wake up a "real boy" and started covering up his body, keeping himself invisible -- from his parents, from his friends, from the world. But after being deserted by the best friend he thought would always be by his side, J decides that he's done hiding -- it's time to be who he really is. And this time he is determined not to give up, no matter the cost.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was a little scared of this book. I knew that Beam had it in her to realistically portray the transgender experience, so my expectations were super high. I also knew that a book like this has the potential to be filled with well-meaning stereotypes in order to present the most inclusive picture: of trans folk, of Puerto Rican New Yorkers, of the dream of being a "real boy," and more. But my fears were unfounded; I loved this book. J really rang true to me as a character and as a transguy, and his experiences, though not universal (thankfully not everyone has to move out or change schools in order to transition, though some undoubtedly do), were realistic. I Am J was everything I hoped it would be. But I did have a couple of problems. I found it hard to believe that J, who has been looking around on the internet for information and support since he was eleven, hadn't heard about T (testosterone injections) or a (chest) binder until he was seventeen. I'm willing to let that go

as it allows the reader to learn about these things at the same time that J does. I don't think it would have been such a problem if the book wasn't so obviously written by someone who, like J's support group leader, "talk[s] about the 'gender binary' and 'those of trans-masculine identification' as easily as reciting the alphabet" (243).^{*} Beam is a very very knowledgeable woman, as evidenced by her previous work of non-fiction, *Transparent: Love, Family, and Living the T with Transgender Teenagers*. She seemed to have a difficult time balancing her wealth of knowledge with the naiveté of her narrator. This may look like more criticisms than praise, but it's really not! I loved *I Am J*, and I applaud Beam for taking on the issue of transitioning in the context of cultural and familial expectations, and the fallout from not meeting those expectations, in an accessible and authentic way. Not to mention that she wrote a pretty great story of a teen trying to find his direction and place in the world, regardless of all the issues that J has to deal with. I think this is a must buy for libraries serving youth; it's *Luna* for the guys. Book source: ARC provided by the publisher.^{*} Quotes and page numbers are from an uncorrected proof and may not match the published copy.

I Am J tells a story that is rarely told—the coming of age of a transgender teenager. In this case, it's the story of J, a biracial (Latino and Jewish) transgender boy who is struggling to become comfortable with his gender identity while coming out to his family and friends. J's story features many aspects of atypical young adult novels—the search for identity, the need for a sense of belonging, emerging values that conflict with those of parents, romance, the confusion of adolescent sexuality, the pressures of high school. J, however, also copes with the challenges of a gender identity that doesn't match his physical body. Further frustrating matters, J has few resources he can use to educate himself about his predicament until he runs away from home and encounters a marginalized community of others who, like him, are gender variant. Identifying the resources that can help him leads J to confront new issues—accepting and understanding those resources, finding a way to make them work for him, and developing the confidence to share his gender identity with those he loves. Although some of the plot developments feel as though they've been lifted directly from some standardized paradigm of the challenges faced by most trans* youth (running away from home, confusion over sexual orientation, asserting control over one's physical development, securing the resources for hormone therapy, finding a community, enduring bullying), Beam has woven these elements into a credible story about a protagonist who is complex, dynamic, and likeable. J is by no means perfect, but it is nearly impossible not to root for his success.

I Am J is a moving look at a teenager's gender transition and coming of age. J has known he was meant to be a boy since he was little, but hasn't had a way to truly articulate that or figure out how to make it an actuality until the time this book takes place, when he's 17. He wants to share the news with his best friend, Melissa, but being a little bit in love with her, or at the very least, having a major crush, he has trouble expressing exactly what it is he's feeling. He is also just discovering the ways he can actually turn himself not just into a boy, but into a man, and he hits a lot of stumbling blocks along the way. His family is one of the biggest stumbling blocks, and trying to stay close to them when they don't understand what he's going through is a theme that crops up throughout the book, something he continues to navigate. J starts to create a new "family" when he starts at a new school and starts to meet fellow transgender people. He meets Blue, one of the most fascinating characters in the book (and not just because she has blue hair and paints exclusively in shades of blue), who becomes his girlfriend. I didn't always like everything J did, but I thought he was a fascinating character, and as he matures, he figures out how to have empathy for those around him, like Melissa, and seek out the help he needs to be the man he wants to be. He realizes that his transition is extremely important to him, but that photography is also his passion, and that entirely abandoning his previous life wasn't necessary to lead him on the path he needed to be. Beam doesn't try to paint J as the "perfect" trans teenager (is there such a thing?) but as a human one who is figuring out who he is, who his role models are, and where he fits in at school, home and in the world.

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