

BEYOND MAGENTA

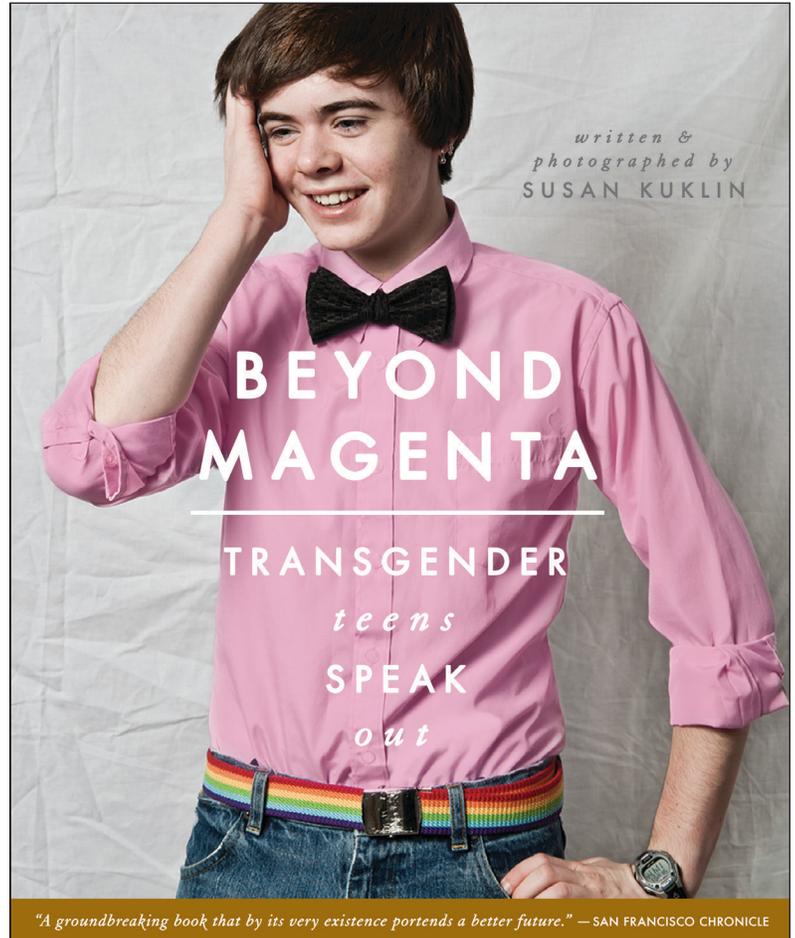
TRANSGENDER
teens
SPEAK
out

*written &
photographed by*
SUSAN KUKLIN

ABOUT THE BOOK

A groundbreaking work of LGBT literature takes an honest look at the lives, loves, and struggles of transgender teens.

Author and photographer Susan Kuklin met and interviewed six transgender or gender-neutral young adults and used her considerable skills to represent them thoughtfully and respectfully before, during, and after their personal acknowledgment of gender preference. Portraits, family photographs, and candid images grace the pages, augmenting the emotional and physical journey each youth has taken. Each honest discussion and disclosure, whether joyful or heartbreaking, is completely different from the others because of family dynamics, living situations, gender, and the transition these teens make in recognition of their true selves.



HC: 978-0-7636-5611-9
PB: 978-0-7636-7368-0
E-book: 978-0-7636-7035-1
Also available in audio

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

This guide can be used with large or small groups to inspire discussion about the ideas and issues presented in the book. Questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.


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Discussion Questions from E. M. Kokie & Kathleen T. Horning

1. What are some of the assumptions people make based on perceptions of gender? What pressures do family, friends, and society place on a person based on their perceived gender identity?
2. Jessy first came out as a lesbian, and later as trans. How did the two experiences differ? Was one more difficult than the other for Jessy? Why or why not?
3. During Jessy's early high-school years, he didn't know what the word transgender meant. "Hey, if you like women and you're a woman, then you're a lesbian" (page 7). How important is terminology in knowing one's self? Do you think kids today know more about gender diversity?
4. Jessy's girlfriend, Nan, refers to Jessy as "she." Why do you think this is? Why do you think Jessy doesn't mind?
5. Christina says, "The other day I was thinking, I really, really hate being a transgender. It's a constant struggle. It's so annoying" (page 33). Why do you think Jessy and Christina have such different feelings about being trans?
6. Christina was bullied in elementary and high school. Have you ever witnessed someone being bullied for being perceived as LGBTQ? What happened? What did you do?
7. Christina's counselor tells her that if she wants to transition she should "do it after high school" (page 42). Why do you think he gave this advice? Do you agree with it? What do you think are the benefits of transitioning when you're younger? What could be some drawbacks?
8. Christina talks about getting her nails done and getting her school uniform sweater tailored to look more feminine. Why do you think clothes and fashion in general are so important to gender identity?
9. Christina says, "I think the other students were freaked out because I looked like a girl and I was pressing against gender boundaries" (page 49). Why do you think some people get upset when someone challenges gender boundaries? Does it ever upset you?
10. Mariah requested that no photographs of her appear in the book, saying, "I'm not a success story right now" (page 74). Why does Mariah think this?
11. Mariah says, "Everyone goes through one kind of transition or another. We go through transitions every day. Except mine is maybe a little extreme. I'm not at the end of my transition. I'm barely at the beginning" (page 91). What sorts of transitions has Mariah gone through in her life? What sorts of transitions have you gone through or think you will go through in the future?
12. Cameron says, "Gender is one variable in a person's identity, and sexual orientation is another variable. The two are not connected. Being trans is not the next step to being gay" (page 95). In contrast, both Christina's and Jessy's best friends continued to think they were gay, even after they came out as transgender. Christina's friend asked her, "Why can't you just be a gay man?" (page 43). How are gender identity and sexual orientation connected, if at all? How do they differ? Why do you think some people seem more able to accept that a person is gay or lesbian than transgender?
13. Cameron says, "Being trans is not something that is accurately portrayed in the media" (page 112). What portrayals of transgender or gender-neutral people have you seen in the media? Are they accurate? Why or why not?
14. Why do you think Nat wanted to be photographed in black-and-white?
15. Nat says, "When the doctors confirmed that I was intersex, I thought, *Wow, I'm that whole other gender!* It proved what I had been feeling all along. I was not only emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually both sexes; I was physically both sexes, too" (page 136). How does Nat experience gender compared to some of the other teens?
16. Luke says, "There's a lot you can say in poetry that you can't say in conversation" (page 152). Why do you think it's easier for Luke to speak his mind onstage in front of an audience of strangers than in conversation with people he knows?
17. How did Luke's acting affect his coming-out process?
18. Photographs are a very important part of *Beyond Magenta*. What do you learn about each teen from looking at his, her, or their photographs?

19. Mariah identifies as *being* transgender, while Cameron talks about *doing* gender. How do you think their gender identities or expression differ?
20. Several of the teens discuss ways in which society, aside from their families, began to treat them differently after they began transitioning. What observations did they make?
21. How did being transgender, intersex, or gender-neutral affect each teen's early childhood?
22. In all of the stories, personal pronouns are very important. What are your personal pronouns, and who decided what your pronouns would be?
23. Did reading this book change your understanding of gender identity? Why or why not?

About E. M. Kokie & Kathleen T. Horning

E. M. Kokie writes novels about teens, particularly those on the cusp of life-changing moments. Her debut novel, *Personal Effects*, explores loss, recovery, and competing visions of masculinity in the shadow of the conflict in Iraq. A lawyer by training, she loves a good story and a good debate, even better if she can have the last word. She can be found online at www.emkokie.com, tweets as @EMKokie, and blogs at www.thepiratetree.com, a collective of children's and young adult writers interested in literature for adolescent readers and social justice issues.

Kathleen T. Horning is director of the Cooperative Children's Book Center of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For ten years, she also worked part-time as a children's librarian at Madison Public Library. She is the author of *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books*. She frequently writes and lectures about children's and young adult literature and is a regular reviewer for the *Horn Book* magazine.

E. M. Kokie Interviews Author & Photographer Susan Kuklin

What was the genesis of the idea for Beyond Magenta, and how did it evolve from initial inspiration to proposal to finished book?

Susan: *Beyond Magenta* began with an e-mail from a librarian friend whom I respect a lot. She mentioned the need for more nonfiction LGBTQ literature for young adults. Sometime later my cousin, who is pansexual and a generation behind me, told me about a transgender friend who broadened her thinking by saying, "When looking for love and friendship, it's the person, not the gender, that counts." That comment got me thinking. Although the book was always about the transgender teen community, the emphasis shifted somewhat toward gender fluidity.

How did you select the teens to interview? What obstacles or stumbling blocks did you face?

Susan: It took months and months and months to find, meet, and talk with an organization that could help me find teens for the book. When I met the folks at the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center, I knew I was in exactly the right place. They have a great reputation as well as a special program called HOTT (Health Outreach to Teens). Once HOTT was on board, we looked for ways to approach the young people without compromising the confidentiality between the caregivers and their clients. Added to the clinic's requirements were my own prerequisites to balance the book's need for diversity without turning anyone down. Everyone who called was included in the book. No one was rejected. This process—from the first queries to the first participant's phone call—took close to a year. Meanwhile, I was reading, studying, and attending transgender conferences and panels.

The visual design of Beyond Magenta is wonderful. The visual presentation of the different teens' stories varies, some with color photos, one in black-and-white, one with no photos at all, one of just hands and silhouettes. What factors affected the visual presentation and design of each section? What challenges did a pictureless chapter pose, or one with photos but none of the teen's face?

Susan: Each chapter needed to be visually different because each person is distinct. So I knew from the get-go that I wanted a different photographic style for each photo essay. The specific choices came about spontaneously, after getting to know each person. The pictureless chapter and the one where the teen's face is hidden were not a problem at all. It was important that everyone who took part in the project be completely comfortable. All of the participants were given options about the degree of anonymity they could choose. I respected their choices.

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E. M. Kokie Interviews Author & Photographer Susan Kuklin

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What about the double-page spread on pages 92–93—where did that come from?

Susan: One night when I couldn't fall asleep I started playing a word game with myself. Some people count sheep, some count presidents. I often think about words. That night I tried to find words that begin with "trans." It became a eureka moment: wouldn't it be interesting to add a list of trans words as a way to "transition" the book to its next section? I went up to my studio, turned on the computer, and wrote down words that started with "trans." What does it actually mean? It's yours to interpret as you will.

It's really impressive how honest and open the teens are about their experiences, their lives, their transitions, and so on. How did you balance their comfort and safety with telling their stories honestly? What challenges were there in working your interviews with them into a narrative that was engaging, but showed their voices?

Susan: The teens chose to be in the book because they wanted their voices heard and because they wanted to help other people. At times they'd ask me to turn off the tape so that they could explain something that was too personal to go into the book. They each had a very strong sense about themselves. I transcribed every word in the interviews. I needed to do this to immerse myself in their stories and particular speech patterns. I suspect it's rather like a novelist hearing her characters' voices. While actually writing I tried to choose statements that told their story but were not voyeuristic. To be sure that everything was accurate, the teens were invited to read their chapters throughout the editing process.

How much of a learning curve did you face in learning the language to tell these stories respectfully?

Susan: Basically I went from zero to still learning. It was of the utmost importance that the language in the book be correct and respectful to both the teens and the transgender community. I learned most of it from the kids. If I had a question about a word or a phrase, I'd either run it by some of the teens or ask the pros at Callen-Lorde. This became a team effort.

It was humbling to realize how brave these teens are, to live their lives openly and be true to themselves in a world that hasn't quite caught up yet. Was it humbling for you, as well, while interviewing and photographing them? Were there also particular moments of inspiration and joy in getting to know them?

Susan: You bet! That's why I open the book with a personal statement about how awesome the teens were. Personal moment? It is impossible to choose one moment. Every time I spoke with the teens was an honor and a privilege.

How has this experience changed your outlook about gender and sexuality?

Susan: One of the perks that comes with writing and researching books is that I get to learn something new. I'd like to think that I am more sensitive about sex and gender issues now. I bristle when filling out forms that ask me to check "Male" or "Female." I cringe, and sometimes speak out, when I hear parents say to their male child, "No, no, you can't have that. Pink is for girls." Why? My life is so much fuller and clearer because of what I've learned working on *Beyond Magenta*.

This interview was adapted from an author interview that appeared on The Pirate Tree blog at <http://www.thepiratetree.com/2014/03/13/beyond-magenta-an-interview-with-susan-kuklin-part-i/>

About Susan Kuklin



Susan Kuklin is the award-winning author and photographer of more than thirty books for children and young adults that address social issues and culture. Her photographs have appeared in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times*. Susan Kuklin lives in New York City.



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