

Symptoms of Being Human Study Guide

Symptoms of Being Human by Jeff Garvin

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Contents

Symptoms of Being Human Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-3.....	5
Chapters 4-6.....	9
Chapters 7-9.....	13
Chapters 10-13.....	17
Chapters 14-16.....	21
Chapters 17-18.....	25
Chapters 19-20.....	28
Chapters 21-23.....	31
Chapters 24-26.....	35
Chapters 27-30.....	38
Chapters 31-34.....	42
Chapters 35-36.....	46
Characters.....	49
Symbols and Symbolism.....	56
Settings.....	58
Themes and Motifs.....	60
Styles.....	65
Quotes.....	67

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Garvin, Jeff. *The Symptoms of Being Human*. Kindle, 2016.

NOTE: With respect to the main character's gender fluidity, this study guide uses "they," "their," and "them" to refer to the singular Riley Cavanaugh.

Being a teen is hard, even under the best of circumstances. As a gender fluid teen, Riley Cavanaugh, the main character and narrator of the novel *The Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin, anticipates rude remarks and stares. Along with the pain of being bullied, Riley spends a good deal of time feeling wrong in their own body. When their psychiatrist suggests that Riley start a blog to help relieve their anxiety and connect with others like them, Riley finds a niche for themselves. Through their blog, Riley not only connects with other LGBTQ teens but is also invited to speak on a conference panel to discuss the use of social media as a way to connect members of that community.

When Riley transfers from private Catholic school to a public school, they hope that the students there will be more open minded. Unfortunately, Riley learns that students in public school are just as cruel as their peers in private school. Riley does make a few close friends. Solo is an overweight darker skinned boy who is bullied because of his love of Star Wars and the Chewbacca backpack he once wore. He advises Riley that they need to try to bring less attention to themselves. He suggests that it is Riley's dress and behavior that invites the harassment Riley receives.

Bec, whom Riley thought was a boy at first, connects with Riley because her sister was transgender. Bec takes Riley to a meeting of the Q, a support group for members of the LGBTQ community. Riley finally begins to feel that they have a physical place where they fit in. Riley had already developed an online support group through an anonymous blog they started as part of therapy. Riley discovered the blog was therapeutic and that people connected with Riley's blogs. One transgender girl, Andie Gingham, reached out to Riley because she wanted to kill herself after her parents reacted badly when she came out to them.

Riley's online identity, Alix, becomes popular after Andie is badly beaten by her father when she returns to her parents. News outlets that carried Andie's story included Andie's words of thanks to Alix for encouraging her to keep on living. Even though she was beaten, Alix did not regret having come out as transgender.

When Riley attends her second meeting of the Q, the group leader Mike/Michelle recognizes Riley as the blogger Alix just by the way Riley talks and the way people react to Riley's words. Mike/Michelle asks Riley to consider being a speaker on a panel to discuss the use of the internet to develop an online LGBTQ community.

Riley's world falls apart when a student at their school hacks Riley's blog and discovers that Riley is Alix. Reporters are contacted and wait for Riley and their family to leave an



important campaign event for Riley's father, who is running for reelection as a United States congressman. Riley had not yet come out to their parents and is forced to do so in a high tension atmosphere. Riley's father's reelection campaign is ruined.

Riley leaves their parents' house the night they come out as gender fluid angry because of their parents' reaction. Riley is followed by three boys from their school. These boys assault Riley in an attempt to determine if Riley is male or female. Solo and Bec find Riley and stop the attack. Instead of making Riley want to hide, the attack gives Riley the strength needed to come out publicly and participate in the panel.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

In Chapter 1, Riley tries to begin a blog post. Riley knows the first thing that the reader will want to know is if they are a girl or boy. Riley, unable to finish the post, deletes it when their parents call them to take them to their first day at Park Hills High. Riley wears an outfit of jeans, a t-shirt and Doc Martens. It is Riley's attempt to go neutral since they know the students at the new school will expect them to look the same every day.

Riley makes their parents drive them to school in the minivan so other students will not see the government plates on their father's car and realize he is a congressman. At the school, Riley walks past a group of girls who do not say anything to them, but a brunette among a group of girls looks at Riley and asks if they are a guy or a girl. She refers to Riley as an "it" (5).

In Chapter 2, Riley steps into a restroom to try and regain composure. Shocked that the harassment has started so quickly, Riley determines to still make the best of this fresh start and heads for the AP English classroom. Riley is the first one there but not long after, a huge brown boy enters. He is wearing headphones and is surprised when he finally notices Riley. In his surprise he knocks his backpack off the desk on which he had just placed it. Riley helps him pick up his things, including a large number of pink candies that turn out to be strawberry Starbursts. They talk until Riley believes they have said something that Solo interprets as an attempt to flirt. Riley think that Solo sees them as a guy. Regardless, Solo starts talking to Riley again, asking why he has not seen Riley at Park Hills High before. Riley explains they transferred from a private school.

After AP Government, Riley and Solo's second class together, a boy, identified by Solo as Jim Vickers intentionally knocks into Riley. He calls Riley a "bitch" (15) and tells Riley to watch where they are going. Riley notices that Vickers gives Solo a reproachful look.

In Chapter 3, a blond girl in Riley's French class talks to Riley but Riley is suspicious of her motivations. It is during this class that Riley begins to dread lunch. It was always the worst part of the day at Immaculate Heart, the private school Riley once attended.

Riley studies the cafeteria layout in the new school before entering, trying to find a safe place to sit. In order to get to the food line, Riley has to walk between the lines of tables. The comments about Riley's appearance start when they reaches the center of the aisle. Riley is able to tolerate a few comments confusing their gender but is distressed when they hear Jim ask "Dude. Is that the new tranny?" (21). Riley sees Solo sitting with Jim and his girlfriend, the girl who called Riley an "it" earlier. It is at this point that Riley realizes Solo is on the football team. Riley is able to run from the cafeteria before the



tears begin. As Riley passes one table, a guy in a peacoat turns and looks at Riley as Riley is leaving the cafeteria.

Analysis

Right away any reader who has ever been bullied or made fun of as a teen can sympathize with Riley. Riley's pain, however, goes much beyond simply being the new student at school. At this point, it appears that Riley is some form of transgender. They identify neither as a boy or a girl. This is proven by the first line of the novel as Riley tries to begin their blog post. Riley addresses the reader, acknowledging that readers of the potential blog will want to know if Riley is a boy or a girl. Riley does not know how to answer that question.

The author chooses to write this story in the first person. This choice of point of view is important because it allows Riley to refer to themselves as "I" and takes the emphasis off gender. Had a third person narrator been used, Riley would have to be referred to by a gender specific pronoun. Of course, the gender neutral pronoun "they" could have been used but use of that pronoun might have caused the reader to be more caught up in the use of this pronoun. Use of the first person point of view is a safe and non-disruptive choice.

Since the main plot of the novel is Riley's struggle to present themselves as being no gender in particular, this constant use of a gender specific pronoun would have interfered with this attempt. There are no specific references to gender beyond the assumptions made by the students at Riley's new school. The author takes pains to keep references to Riley gender neutral.

In the first chapter, the author introduces the stress that Riley feels as they struggle to be true to their identity. Riley does not set out to offend anyone. In fact, Riley considers the outfit they choose to be gender neutral. Despite their attempt to be gender neutral, Riley feels the pressure of other people's opinions right away. Riley notices that their father's "smile wilts as he notices my outfit" (2). He gives Riley advice in the form of the old adage that a person never gets a second chance to make a first impression. He is suggesting that Riley might want to present themselves differently on the first day of school. Despite the attempt to blend in, Riley already hears people referring to them as "it" and "tranny" (transvestite) based on their appearance.

Despite the ways in which they are different from the other students, Riley maintained hope that a public school might be a second chance for them to find a place to fit in. Riley explains "At Immaculate Heart, it was impossible for someone like me to avoid being singled out; the school was just too small and too conservative. Maybe the people here will be more open-minded" (3). To make matters worse, Riley's father is a congressman, a red flag that singles Riley out as being different on its own merit.

Riley's behavior lets the reader know that they have been struggling with bullying for a long time. It is mentioned that Riley sees a psychiatrist, Doctor Ann, who has not only



suggested that Riley start a blog, but also has helped Riley to develop some coping mechanisms. One of the coping mechanisms that Riley uses in this section is that of deep breathing in order to calm themselves and try to prevent an anxiety attack. Riley also plans out and carefully chooses where they will sit in class and with what group they might be most easily accepted before they makes any moves.

This novel is not only about the assumptions that other people make about Riley but also the assumptions that Riley makes about the people they meet. For instance, Riley prejudged the students in the cafeteria trying to decide where best to try and fit in. Riley groups the students into categories based on the way they are dressed or by what items they carry with them.

Riley additionally makes assumptions about individual students. Even though Riley strikes up a friendship with Solo, Riley changes their mind about Solo when they learn that Solo is a member of the football team. Riley thinks that no one on the football team would be willing to be friends with them. Riley also makes assumptions about the blond girl who sits in front of Riley in French class. The girl asks Riley about the t-shirt Riley is wearing but Riley suspects that the girl has an ulterior motive. Another assumption that Riley makes in this section is that the student they see wearing a peacoat is a guy. One of the great aspects of this story is that even while others are using their assumptions about Riley to hurt them, Riley is learning that even they make incorrect assumptions about others based on their extra curricular activities, dress or hair color.

One symbol that will be significant in this novel is Solo's Starbursts. These pink candies that fall out of his back pack when Riley unintentionally surprises him during their first meeting are a symbol of Solo and his offers of friendship to Riley. Riley uses hyperbole, or exaggeration, to describe the importance they feel that Solo places on these candies. When Solo offers Riley a piece of candy for the first time, they take it because they feel that refusing the offer would be "tantamount to refusing a peace offering from a foreign diplomat" (9).

This quote leads into a discussion of literary techniques used so far in this section of the novel. Riley's description of the possibility of the refusal of the Starburst as comparing to an international disaster is a use of hyperbole, or exaggeration. Another use of hyperbole is found in Riley's description of the quad at the high school as being "nine hundred miles from end to end" (7). Riley also indicates it "feels just like 'the yard' in some old prison movie" (7). This comparison of the quad to a prison yard is a simile, a comparison using the words "like" or "as." Another simile is found in the description of the Starburst Riley takes from Solo: "It's sweet, and immediately adheres itself to one of my back molars like quick-dry cement" (9).

Discussion Question 1

What is the tone of the novel thus far? How does the author use words and descriptions to develop this tone?



Discussion Question 2

From Riley's first encounter in the novel with their parents, what do you sense about Riley's relationship with them? Do you pick up on any differences between Riley's relationship with their mother and the relationship with their father?

Discussion Question 3

Does the author give any hints about Riley's gender? Why do you think the author tries to keep Riley's identity as gender neutral as possible?

Vocabulary

incessantly, existential, averted, notoriety, abomination, scrutiny, apoplexy, avalanche, tantamount, retort, palpable, nonchalant, pathological, clandestine, oligarchy, palpitates, indefinitely, gauntlet



Chapters 4-6

Summary

In Chapter 4, at home alone, Riley thinks about how their stress is compounded by their father's run for reelection as a congressman. Even though Riley's parents have not forced them to attend any campaign events since Riley was released from a six-week stay at a psychiatric hospital, Riley knows there will soon be a time they will be asked to attend campaign functions again. Their parents believe Riley's regimen of drugs and counseling is making Riley better, they do not realize Riley has not dealt with the main cause of all their anxiety.

As Riley thinks over the event that brought on the stay in the psychiatric hospital as well as the bullying they had faced that day at school, they breathe deeply, like their doctor taught them to do. Riley moves on to the next coping mechanism they were taught, which was to practice acceptance, but Riley is not sure who they are supposed to accept. The third coping mechanism Riley's doctor has suggested is for them to share their feelings on an anonymous blog.

In Riley's first post, they describe the way they feel when people want to know if they are a boy or a girl. Riley feels that the general population assumes there are no other gender options than male or female, but Riley feels as if their gender identity is on a dial, not a switch. Riley describes themselves as being gender fluid. Because they feel they have to dress in a gender neutral way in order to avoid ridicule, Riley says they feel uncomfortable with themselves most of the time. They admit that they have not yet told their parents about the dysphoria and gender fluidity. Riley smiles when publishing their first blog and notices that they have a follower right away.

Riley tries to avoid talking about the first day of school by distracting their father with talk about the committee session that had just finished. When he does turn to questioning Riley about the first day, Riley is vague and tells him they are taking their time about approaching other students there. Riley's mother steers the talk to an upcoming fundraiser. Riley's anxiety rises when they are asked to attend.

In Chapter 5, Riley blogs that they are distressed with the way they do not feel either male or female. Riley relates the point at which they realized there was something wrong with them. Their father had given them an opportunity to pick out a toy at a toy store. Riley narrowed the decision to a Bratz doll and a Power Ranger. The look on their father's face when they looked at him to help them decide told Riley there was something wrong with the options they were considering.

When Riley was 15, they were introduced to the term "gender fluid." Riley felt relieved that the strangeness they had felt their entire life had a name. Riley wonders through their blog what it would take to change the public mindset about alternative gender



identities and allow people in the LGBTQ community to feel they did not have to pretend about their identities in public.

Riley realizes it is 2 a.m. and is about to try to go to sleep when they notice they have a message. This message from an anonymous poster tells Riley that they are a fag. Riley replies to the messenger, criticizing him for his inability to properly use “you’re” instead of “your.” Riley includes with the discussion information about gender fluidity.

In Chapter 6, Riley wakes dreaming that they chose the doll at which they had been looking when they were in the store with their father as a six-year old. Riley feels more feminine than ever and wants to wear a dress but knows that they have to wear a gender neutral outfit to keep themselves safe. They struggle through the day, using all of the tricks they know to calm the dysphoria.

In English, Riley refuses to speak to or even look at Solo. They believe they cannot be friends because he is a football player. At the end of French class, Riley’s anxiety has increased to the point that the girl in front of Riley asks if they are okay. Riley lies and says they are. Riley makes it through the gauntlet at lunch with no snide comments and runs for a wheelchair ramp behind the auditorium.

The boy with the peacoat steps up behind Riley as Riley tries to compose themselves, and puts a hand on Riley’s shoulder. Up close, Riley realizes the student is not a boy, but a girl. The girl kids with Riley that since Riley had discovered her secret liar, they will have to pay the required toll. When she realizes how upset Riley is, the girl does her best to calm Riley. As they talk, Riley learns that the girl’s name is Bec. They seem to connect with one another.

Analysis

The reader learns more specifics about Riley in this section. Riley was put into a psychiatric hospital after they had some sort of breakdown brought on by stress from their father’s campaign schedule. Riley also identifies themselves as being gender fluid, as if there is a dial inside them that constantly turns from feelings of being a boy to feelings of being a girl. Notice that there are still no specific references to Riley’s gender. The closest the author gets comes in this quote “I think maybe they would have been happier with a son who would play football like Dad did. Or, maybe Mom might have preferred a daughter she could paint her toenails with and take to ballet lessons” (36). This sentence is worded so that Riley’s gender is not revealed. Riley could be a boy who does not like football or a girl who does not like polished nails and ballet, the reader is left unable to determine. Riley’s name also is gender ambiguous. This may be the statement that Bec is trying to make when she tells Riley “Not everyone is born a Riley” (50) after Riley has asked her how she came to be known as Bec.

The complications of Riley’s interactions with their parents are discussed in this section. While Riley presents their father as being the parent who would be most upset by Riley’s gender fluidity, they seem to think that their mother might actually understand



their situation. Riley's mother, who chews her fingernails and eats antacids, seems to have trouble with anxiety, just like Riley does. Riley's father, on the other hand, seems to be very sure of himself. He is put out with Riley and Riley's refusal to be as outgoing as he would like them to be. When Riley's father tells Riley that they need to attend his fundraising dinner, Riley senses he is choosing his tone and words to purposefully manipulate them. "He doesn't use his congressman voice; but that's probably a calculated choice. All of his choices are calculated" (35). Amusing is Riley's description of the way their parents treat them. As an only child, Riley believes their parents wish they had gotten a child who was less complex, "But instead, they got me — something they don't quite understand and tend to handle alternately like a glass figurine and a feral cat" (37). Riley believes they are being treated by their parents alternatively like something that might break and like something that might cause serious bodily harm.

Riley continues to depend on coping mechanisms taught by their psychiatrist in order to get through anxiety. Riley finally manages to post a message on the anonymous blog they have set up. They are excited when they learn they are being followed by one person, but is devastated when they get an anonymous message telling Riley that Riley is a fag. This anonymous post is significant. Its significance will be better understood later in the novel.

Meanwhile, Riley describes to the reader what it is like to have to wear gender neutral clothes when they feel distinctly feminine. Riley resorts to all of the tricks that they know, including applying lip balm and adopting a more feminine body posture in order to ease their feelings of discomfort.

One of the coping mechanisms that Riley describes includes what will be an important object in the novel. Riley has been instructed by their therapist to imagine a whiteboard in the midst of a void of darkness. Riley is to imagine that they are using a paintbrush to paint that whiteboard black. They never completely get the board covered in black before the white begins showing through. In this particular instance, even attempting to complete the exercise does not calm Riley like it usually does.

Two other important symbols in the novel include the Bratz doll and the Power Ranger. The Bratz doll represents the feminine side of Riley while the Power Ranger represents the masculine side. Since Riley is very sensitive, they are able to read their father's facial expressions and understand that he is confused by the conflicting choices. Riley realizes that by narrowing their choices to one male specific and one female specific toy, they are not following some rule of gender that they do not understand. In order to relieve their father, Riley puts both the doll and Power Ranger away and chooses the gender neutral Pirates of the Caribbean Game Board.

Riley does make a very important statement in this section that turns out to be very ironic. Of the blog post, Riley convinces themselves it is okay to reveal their true feelings because "It's not like anyone is going to read it" (27). The statement seems to jinx Riley as they will soon have no idea how well read the blog will become.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of Riley's belief that they had to make choices that were not only approved by their parents, but also safe and approved by the public in general. Have you ever felt this way?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Riley's first encounter with Bec. What is your impression of Bec? Do you think she and Riley will be friends?

Discussion Question 3

Because Riley sees Solo sitting with the football boys at lunch, Riley automatically assumes that they cannot be friends. Is this assumption fair to Solo? In what ways is Riley judging him, just like Riley believes others are judging them?

Vocabulary

congeal, ricochet, ambiguous, emanating, binary, antagonize, dysphoria, incredulous, unanimous, alleviate, drivel, transgender, voraciously, validation, harbinger, duration, lair, invasive, intuition, defection



Chapters 7-9

Summary

In Chapter 7 when Riley gets home from school, there is an unfamiliar car in the driveway. They try to sneak into the house without being seen but comes face to face with the girl who called them “it” on the first day of school, as she comes out of the bathroom in Riley’s house. A woman’s voice calls for Sierra to come show how her blemishes had been cleared by tea tree oil. Riley goes into the room where the women are but their mother does not make them stay, instead gives them an excuse to go to their room. Riley feels bad for Sierra and senses that Sierra’s mother makes life miserable for her. Riley not feel badly enough, however, that it makes up for Sierra calling Riley an “it” the day before.

When Riley opens their Bloglr account they are surprised to notice they have 58 followers. One follower begs them to post more. In their new post, Riley writes about their own confusion over Bec’s gender. Riley explains that they understand a person’s need to categorize a person as male or female, but that a person’s anatomical features, or even how they dress, does not indicate the gender with which they identify inside. They argue that it is time for society to change from its view of only binary options for gender.

In school the next day, Riley goes with the flow as they fluctuate from feeling like a girl to feeling like a boy in the middle of the day. In their government class, Bec asks Riley to come to her house on Thursday at 7 p.m. for a study session. Riley tries to decide if it is a date or if Bec just wants a study partner. At first Riley tells her that they cannot come because they have something they already have to do on Thursday. Before she leaves class that day, Bec drops a note on Riley’s desk.

In Chapter 8, on Thursday Bec does not show up for school. During lunch, Riley looks at the note that she dropped on the desk the day before. It has Bec’s phone number written on it.

At home that evening, Riley looks at the outfit they are supposed to wear to the campaign dinner that night. It reminds them of a costume because it is the most gender specific thing that they own. Riley tries to dress but winds up pulling off the outfit and throwing it in a pile on the floor. Their mother calls to make sure they are almost ready and Riley tells her that they cannot go. Their father starts a lecture, telling them their behavior is unacceptable but Riley cuts in and tells their father that they have a study date. After some whispered conversation, Riley’s parents agree to let them go and miss the fundraiser. Riley calls Bec to tell her they are coming to study.

In Chapter 9 when Riley arrives at Bec’s house, her brother Erik opens the door. Before Bec rescues them, Riley gets the feeling that Erik is trying to figure out what gender Riley is. He starts to ask but Bec makes him go away. As they walk toward Bec’s room,



she tells Riley that Erik is having a rough week because one of the guys on the football team has told Erik that if he loses weight and does some favors for other boys on the team, he could have a spot.

Inside Bec's room, Riley notices the room is divided in two halves, as if two people once lived there. Bec explains she once had a sister who died. Bec keeps the room as it is in order to remember her.

When Riley asks Bec why she was not at school, Bec says she was traveling with her dad who does not live with them. She takes Riley's computer from them, telling Riley that Erik will have to tweak the settings in order to allow them to use the Wi-Fi connection.

As they study, Riley gets the feeling several times that Bec is hitting on them but they are not sure. One of the links they are supposed to explore in preparation for the quiz is one set up by a democratic congresswoman from Texas. Among the groups that have endorsed her for reelection is QueerAlliance.org LGBTQ Resources. A picture of Mike/Michelle Weston is included for that group. Riley is shocked when they see their blog, as Alix, included under the list of "Featured Blogs." They quickly get out of that website and tell Bec they have to leave. Riley hopes that Bec did not notice the blog even though Bec would not have connected Riley with Alix.

Analysis

Riley's blog is important not only because it helps them therapeutically but also because the information that Riley puts in that blog helps the reader to understand how it feels for Riley to be gender fluid. The author uses the blog as a platform from which to teach the reading audience about the differences in gender identity without sounding preachy or stuffy because the information is coming from a teen who identifies as being gender fluid.

To make the learning even better, Riley's snarky attitude makes the blogs fun and interesting. Riley is able to admit that they misidentified Bec's gender, seeing her as a boy when Bec is anatomically a girl. Even though Bec was dressed in such a way to make Riley think she was a boy, Riley can tell when they begin to get to know Bec that Bec identifies as a girl.

In order to keep Riley from appearing as a martyr, the author makes sure to make references to the problems of the other students with whom Riley associates. Bec's sister is dead. Erik is overweight but has been told by Jim Vickers, the same boy who has made hateful comments to Riley, that if he loses weight he can get on the football team. Sierra's mother makes her life miserable. Additionally, Sierra seems to have something on her arms that she hides from Riley when they come face-to-face in Riley's house.

Riley begins to experiment with being brave in this section of the novel. It is the first time they try to go against their father's wishes when Riley refuses to go to the fundraising



dinner, insisting instead that they have a study date. Instead of forcing them to go, Riley's parents allow them to go to the study session. Their father's words before their mother makes him hush shows his attitude toward Riley. He begins by lecturing Riley over the phone, telling them that their behavior is "unacceptable" (67) because he needs his family at the dinner in order to make a good impression. He is more worried about his campaign than about his child.

Riley calls the clothes they are expected to wear to the fundraiser their costume. They describe getting dressed in this way: "Putting it on is like a suicide ritual; as I dress, I'm killing any possibility of expressing my other, less acceptable self" (64). Notice how careful the author is to keep any references to the outfit unbiased. There are no hints given as to whether it is a dress or a suit that Riley is expected to wear. Whichever it is, it makes Riley feel as if they are being pushed into the wrong pigeonhole.

Meanwhile, Riley is working themselves toward telling their parents their identity as gender fluid. The reader can see that Riley is already trying to gauge what their reactions might be by the way they react to comments that they makes on a day-to-day basis. When their father asks the gender of Riley's study date, Riley believes "Dad was probably asking because he suspects I'm gay. That's not so bad, especially since he seems open to talking about it" (69). Riley, however, suspects that their mother might react in a different, more negative way. This is a switch from Riley's opinion in a previous section when they thought their mother might be more accepting of Riley being gender fluid than her father.

Important to remember in this section is the fact that Bec tells Riley that Erik has been told he needs to do some "favors" for the members of the football team in order to become a member of that team. Keep in mind also that Riley had to give their computer to Erik so he could change some settings in order for them to get on their Wi-Fi, which was stolen from a neighbor.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the budding friendship between Bec and Riley. Do you think it is just a friendship or are their deeper feelings on the part of each of them?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way Riley is so distressed when they are forced to wear clothes that do not fit the way they feel in relation to gender. Do you understand this discord at all? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

Why do you think that the author chooses to have Bec come from a less affluent part of town? What does this mean in the larger scheme of the story that Bec is not as well off as Riley?

Vocabulary

revulsion, obliterated, cryptic, disconcerting, repulsed, defunct, savant, controversial, impassive



Chapters 10-13

Summary

In Chapter 10, Riley arrives at school early to see Jim and Erik together on the football field. Riley notices Erik hand something to Jim when the two boys finish practicing. Although Riley is suspicious of Vickers' decision to help Erik, they pass it off as being none of their business.

Solo tries to talk to Riley in their English class but Riley ignores him. Solo argues that he also knows what it is like to be bullied when Riley finally confronts him and tells him they were bothered by Solo's act of ignoring them in the cafeteria. The two stop talking when other students begin filing into the room.

In government, Riley notices that Bec looks frazzled and that she leaves class as soon as the bell rings. In their math class, Riley is preoccupied with Solo because he indicated to Riley that Riley acts like they are better than everyone else, and Riley is angry enough that Riley decides to confront Solo.

When Riley spots Solo in the cafeteria, they notice Vickers throw a French fry, ketchup and all, at Solo. Riley wonders why Solo allows his "friends" to treat him the way they do. Riley walks up to the table even though Solo shakes his head at them. Sierra, who is sitting at the same table asks Riley "Are you, like, an effeminate dude, or just an ugly chick?" (87). Vickers tries to clarify but Sierra says he still does not get what she wants to know from Riley. She is not shy in asking Riley if Riley has a penis or vagina. Riley responds to Sierra that while they are honored by Sierra's interest, Sierra is not their type. Vickers threatens Riley for smarting off to his girlfriend, but Solo stands up and tells Vickers he is being "an ass" (88). Solo walks away and Riley follows him to the parking lot.

In Chapter 11, Solo takes Riley to a video arcade and soda fountain called the Reagan Years. Solo plays Ms. Pac-Man, the game he tells Riley calms him down when he gets mad. After he is finished, Riley asks him to clarify what he said about them feeling like they were better than everyone else. Solo explains that Riley seems to assume everyone is an enemy. He suggests that by this attitude, perhaps Riley invites the bullying Riley receives.

Solo goes on to tell Riley that people gave him a rough time about his weight and the furry Chewbacca backpack that he carried. He wanted to join the football team, even after he showed up for try outs and was laughed off the field. He did not back down but instead tackled Vickers during the first drill and laid him out. Instead of being angry, Vickers was impressed. Solo explained he earned respect not only by proving himself on the field but also by getting a new backpack.



Even though Solo made a change in his public appearance by getting a different backpack, he argues he was not letting Vickers bully him into giving up something he loved. He still likes Star Wars and still talks about it, even around Vickers. He concludes by telling Riley that although high school is hard for everyone, Riley should not let the people who make fun of them keep them from doing what they want.

In Chapter 12, when Solo drops Riley off at home, Riley feels good for the first time since they began attending Park Hills High School.

In their bedroom, Riley checks the Bloglr account and sees that they have more than 500 followers. Knowing that many people have read their most personal feelings, Riley feels naked but also realizes it is possible that they are not as alone in their feelings as they once believed. One poster asks for advice on how to come out to her sister. Riley, writing as Alix, admits to this poster that they have not yet come out as being gender fluid, so they have no good advice on how to do that.

When Riley's parents get home that evening, they lecture Riley about leaving school. Riley feels that they cannot tell their parents the real reason that they left. Riley will say only that the other kids made fun of the way they dressed. At that comment, Riley's father launches into a lecture about how Riley should dress the way they want to be judged. Even though Riley asks him to stop lecturing them, he continues. Riley finally puts their hands over their ears. When Riley's father continues to talk, Riley screams at him to shut up. Riley runs to their room where they put their face in the pillow and scream.

Later, Riley's parents tell them that they are grounded. They take Riley's laptop.

In Chapter 13, after telling Doctor Ann about the good things that happened during the week, as well as the fight with their parents, Riley tells Doctor Ann that Riley does not feel as if they are really working toward fixing what is wrong with Riley during their appointments.

Doctor Ann starts by telling Riley that everyone suffers from anxiety but that Riley might be more sensitive to stressors than the regular person. It makes Riley feel better when Doctor Ann tells Riley that they are coping by taking their medicine, standing up for themselves and even by screaming at their parents. Doctor Ann also tells Riley that feeling uncomfortable with who they are is not a sign of mental illness but of being a human.

During the session Doctor Ann and Riley also agree that Riley will not tell their parents about their gender fluidity until they have had a chance to talk more to Doctor Ann about what they plan to say to their parents. Finally, Doctor Ann advises Riley to find a cause. She suggests that it will help take Riley's mind off themselves.



Analysis

In this section Doctor Ann tells Riley that being uncomfortable with one's self is not a sign of mental illness, but instead a symptom of being human. This idea that to some extent all people are uncomfortable with who they are is an important theme in the novel. Riley is uncomfortable because they are gender fluid but not able to present as they would like to. Solo is uncomfortable with his weight and his nationality. Erik is uncomfortable with his weight and his lack of popularity. He is willing to do anything to become popular. Riley has even determined that Sierra, Vickers' girlfriend, has a mother who drives her crazy and makes her life miserable. Riley senses that Sierra's problems run deeper than just frustration and that the girl may be taking her frustration out on herself by hurting herself.

Riley's relationship with their parents is better demonstrated in this section of the novel. In prior sections the reader has seen how they encouraged Riley on the first day of school and how they allowed Riley to skip a campaign meeting for a study date but this is the first time the reader gets to see how they react to Riley's report that they are being bullied at school.

Riley's father is not very patient with Riley. He assumes Riley has been drinking, and then begins to berate Riley without really waiting to hear Riley's story. When Riley tells him that the other students were making fun of them, Riley's father's response is to throw up his hands. His loaded question "And?" (101) indicates that he believes Riley should be adult enough to handle other students making fun of them.

Riley's father does make a significant insight into the problems between Riley and them even though he does not understand it at the time. They thought they understood what was bothering Riley at the private school, but now that it appears they are having problems at public school as well Riley's father says: "But now we don't know what it is" (102). Until Riley tells their parents about their gender fluidity, their parents will not understand what is wrong with Riley.

Consider the lecture by Riley's father about appearance from the points of view of both Riley and their father. Riley's father believes that Riley chooses to dress sloppily and that is causing the other students to make fun of Riley. In the midst of his lecture he: "makes a dismissive gesture at me. 'Is this who you are?'" (103). Riley's tingling anxiety comes because they know that is not who they are. Riley does not feel free to dress the way they want to, the way that will address how they feel inside. They are pulled between the pain of bullying at school and the pain of parents who do not realize how badly they misunderstand Riley's situation.

It particularly strikes Riley's nerves when their father asks if they have thought about how Riley's behavior will affect his campaign. This is another mention given by Riley's father that his campaign is more important than Riley and Riley's feelings. Riley, however, has worried about how their act of coming out as being gender fluid would affect Riley's father's campaign.



Remember in this section the scene in which Riley sees Erik pass something to Vickers. Although Riley passed it off as none of their business, it will turn out that they were very right in suspecting there was something suspicious about Vickers' friendship with Erik.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Riley's argument with their parents. How would Riley's admission to their parents that they are gender fluid help them to understand how Riley dresses? Why does Riley not tell them about themselves?

Discussion Question 2

Doctor Ann and Solo both try to convince Riley that everyone has trouble with bullying and feeling uncomfortable with themselves. Do you think some people have more trouble with bullying than others? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why is taking Riley's computer from them the worst thing that Riley's parents could do?

Vocabulary

existential, indictment, vantage, effeminate, opacity, epithet, analogy, sequester, velocity, liberating, superficial, emphatically, scrutinized, confrontation, fluctuation, validation



Chapters 14-16

Summary

In Chapter 14, Riley, posting as Alix, asks their Bloglr followers to help them identify what cause they should join. After the request, Riley looks through their messages, one of which asks how they have sex. Riley goes through a process of explaining how that is a rude question and would not be posed to a cismale or cisfemale.

Just as Riley is about to log off, Riley notices a new message. It is from a poster who is at a train station, not knowing where to go with life. This boy tells Alix he had come out to his parents just a few hours ago as a trans girl. They had reacted negatively to the announcement. She is considering killing herself.

Knowing how serious this situation is, Riley asks the poster not to kill themselves. Riley gives her information about other places that are more qualified to give advice than they. Riley does thank the girl for being so brave and tells her there is nothing wrong with her. Riley tries to defend the girls' parents as well, telling her they might just have been shocked by the announcement. Riley includes a website that lists shelters and safe houses to which the girl could go.

Riley is still online, thinking about what they said to the girl, when a new message pops up. It reads "go back where u came from dyke r school doesn't need another faggot" (118).

In Chapter 15, Riley is stunned by the message. It resonates with them because Vickers had used the words "dyke" and "faggot" (87) when he had spoken to Riley a few days before. Riley thinks about what might happen in Vickers exposed them, including the effect it would have on their father's campaign. Riley briefly considers deleting the account but knows it would just be giving in to Vickers and giving up the only means by which they could relieve their anxiety. Riley reads the message again and tries to convince herself that it could have been anyone who wrote the message since there were no specifics, like the name of the school, included in it.

Bec is out of school again the following day so Riley finds themselves alone on the ramp where they usually eat together. Riley is suddenly tired of feeling sorry for themselves and heads for the activities office. They look through a binder that includes all of the activities offered at the school, but none of them appeal to Riley. Riley decides to try to peer tutoring but they spot Sierra Wells, who is working with a student and seems to be genuinely interested. When Sierra sees Riley, however, her smile disappears. Riley notices the scab like patches of skin on Sierra's arms, exposed when the sleeves of her shirt slides up. Riley wonders if the spots are caused by excessive scratching, a form of stress relief a boy at Pineview used. Riley tries to connect with Sierra by apologizing for the way Sierra was used as a prop by her mother when they were at Riley's house, but Sierra brushes Riley off.



Riley avoids Bloglr for the next few days. They are not sure they want to find out what happened to the trans girl at the train station. Riley also feels too anxious because they have not decided upon a way to handle another negative message.

In Chapter 16, during lunch, Bec tells Riley people are talking about Riley since Riley stood up to Vickers during lunch. Riley is most pleased when they learn people are referring to them as “the new kid” (130) and not something more hateful. Bec warns Riley to be careful, that Vickers is not the kind of person that Riley should make mad for no reason. When Riley mentions they are friends with a member of the football team, Bec tells Riley a person cannot be a member of the football team and a geek as well.

Bec invites Riley to a club that coming weekend. As they are discussing it, Erik interrupts. He asks for five dollars for lunch. Bec gives him ten. They both seem uncomfortable. Bec tells Riley to pick her up at six. Bec gives Riley a note that she says explains everything.

At home that evening, Riley has trouble concentrating on their precalculus test because they are thinking instead about what they thinks is a date with Bec. Riley finally brings herself to log on to the Bloglr account. Riley finds dozens of messages of encouragement have been added to the message that they sent the girl. Riley also has a reply from the trans girl. She thanks Riley and tells Riley that she called one of the hotlines Riley suggested. She had gotten the name of a safe house but decided just to go home to her parents.

After sending a message to the girl, Riley notices another message in their inbox. It is from Mike/Michelle Weston. The message asks if Riley would be willing to contribute to the website for the QueerAlliance. Mike/Michelle also tells Riley that Riley has found their cause in encouraging others like them.

Analysis

When Riley’s therapist suggests that Riley find a cause that will help distract them from their problems, Riley hopes to find a cause that will also benefit others. Although Riley searches actively for a cause that will fill what they want, Riley actually stumbles upon this cause while trying to help themselves. The blog Riley began was done so in an attempt to relieve their own anxiety. It is not until Mike/Michelle points out the obvious that Riley realizes they have found their calling in reaching out to others who are like them through the Internet.

This section contains perhaps the happiest tone in the entire book. Riley has been able to help a trans girl devastated after her parents reacted badly to her coming out. Riley also feels certain of their friendship with Solo and their relationship with Bec is developing.

There are some hints that indicate that there is a coming storm. Riley connects an anonymous message they received on Bloglr with Vickers because of the language used. Even though Riley has an immediate reaction that Vickers has somehow



discovered their account and might expose them, Riley tries to ignore their feelings and convince themselves that there is no way for anyone to connect the blog to them.

Also unusual is the behavior of both Bec and Erik when Erik approaches his sister at lunch and asks for money. Erik looks at Riley as if the request has something to do with them. He also seems uncomfortable to be asking Bec for money, not the usual interaction between a brother and a sister. Bec makes a point to stress that she would be loaning Erik the money, but then gives him a ten dollar bill, double the amount for which he asked. The entire encounter is described in Riley's narration as being both unusual and uncomfortable.

At some points in the novel, Riley seems too good to be true. Despite how cruel Sierra has been to Riley, Riley tries again to make amends with Sierra. Although Riley apologizes to the girl and tries to be friendly, Sierra does not respond in kind. She continues to be cruel to Riley. Riley sees the signs of compulsive scratching on Sierra's arms and feels true compassion for the girl. Also, when Riley sends a message to the trans girl's parents, Riley even gives the parents the benefit of the doubt. Riley tries to convince the girl that her parents were just reacting the way they did because they were shocked, not because they really did not want her around them.

Note also that while Riley's father does not think that Riley has the interests of his campaign in mind, one of the first things that Riley thinks about when worrying that their blog post could have been made public is the effect that the information would have on Riley's father's campaign.

Riley also makes an important observation in a blog post. "People don't condemn you for being trans. They condemn you for embracing it" (117). Riley argues that people with sexual orientation that is different from the accepted binary poles of female and male are encouraged to cover up who they really are. They are criticized only if they decide to embrace who they are.

Significant in the language of the novel is the use of pronouns. Pronouns are not used as directed by a person's anatomical sex but by the sex with which that person identifies. The trans girl, for instance, is a boy anatomically but since she identifies as a girl the pronouns "she" and "her" are used in reference to her. In the same way, since Riley transitions between identifying as male and identifying as female, the gender neutral pronouns "they" and "theirs" are used.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Riley did as they should when advising the trans girl who reached out to Riley on the Bloglr site? What might Riley have done differently?



Discussion Question 2

What does Riley's attempt to befriend Sierra say about Riley? What does Sierra's response say about Sierra?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the interaction between Erik and Bec. In what ways is it strange? How is it different from the interaction at their home?

Vocabulary

cataclysmically, euphemism, uncouth, arbitrary, reconcile, stealthily, retaliates, coalition, embellishing, curator



Chapters 17-18

Summary

In Chapter 17, because they have to turn in more paperwork dealing with their transfer, Riley goes to the administration building. While there, Riley sees Vickers outside the counselor's office. From his posture, Riley believes that he looks defeated. He recognizes Riley, but looks away. Vickers' dad walks out of the counselor's office and gives his son a sharp look. Riley sees that Vickers' father is wearing the collar of a priest.

On Saturday, Riley logs onto the blog site to pass the time before the date with Bec. Riley is beginning to feel more sure of themselves while giving advice to others. Although Riley feels more feminine than ever in their real life, Riley worries that dressing as a girl might turn Bec off. Riley does compromise by fixing their hair in a more feminine way.

The address that Bec has given Riley belongs to a warehouse where Bec's band practices. Riley is surprised when a tall boy kisses Bec on the cheek before she gets in the minivan. Disturbed by the scene, Riley asks Bec if the boy is her boyfriend. Bec does not give a straight answer. On the other hand, she does give Riley a playlist she had made for Riley, and tells Riley that they look hot.

Bec directs Riley to drive them to a three-story brick building. Riley thinks it is a strange club and Bec asks her not to be angry. Inside there is a group of chairs arranged in a circle. A tall woman calls Bec over and gives her a hug. She introduces herself as Kanada. As Riley notices Kanada is anatomically male, Kanada asks Bec if she surprised Riley with a visit to the group. Kanada calls over another person whom she refers to as Mimi. Riley recognizes the person, who is wearing a dress, as Mike/Michelle.

In Chapter 18, Riley realizes the "club" to which Bec has brought them is an LGBTQ support group. Riley admits to feeling slightly bigoted while looking around the group. Riley is also ashamed when a person dressed as a girl admits that he is actually in the process of transitioning to his male identity. He says that his problem is that his insurance will not cover the hormones he needs for therapy. He plans to find a new job and continue his transition. Others share their stories. Riley is unable to speak when their turn comes but Kanada comes to the rescue. After the session, Riley has already decided that they want to come back.

Back at home Riley opens the blog account and is shocked to see more than 10,000 followers now. The messages people have left make reference to a news article and advice that Riley gave. Riley finally finds a link and reads how the trans girl to whom Riley sent a message was badly beaten by her father. In the news article, Andie had requested her name be used. She included information about Alix's blog and said that it



had saved her life. After Riley finishes reading the article, Riley is devastated because the girl had been beaten for following their advice. To make sure that the article was not a spoof, Riley found the news website on which the article had been published to make sure it was real. After Riley confirmed it was, they recognized their responsibility in what had happened. After reading one comment in particular, Riley is ashamed of themselves for letting their fear keep them from telling their parents that they are gender fluid. They read all of the messages, half of which are positive and supportive of the advice Riley gave Andie, and half of which are negative and blame Riley for Andie's assault. At the end of the messages Riley finds one from an anonymous poster that reads "c u at lunch. fuckin tranny" (167).

Analysis

Riley's good mood ends with their discovery that the trans girl to whom they gave advice was beaten by their father. Riley is shocked and sickened that the girl came to them for help and got hurt. Riley realizes how serious it is to have given advice that resulted in a person getting hurt. "And what started out as a half-assed attempt to appease my doctor has now affected someone's real life — and potentially the lives of ten thousand other people who read what I wrote" (166). Riley has just encountered one of the strengths of a blog. Riley's blogs have the ability to reach and affect thousands of people, either helping them live a more successful life or causing their lives to be more troubled.

Riley is ashamed for not being brave enough to come out to their parents, as they advised Andie to do. Riley feels like a hypocrite because they are able to admit their gender fluidity only to people whom they may never meet in person. Riley is additionally angry that when others like them do acknowledge their true gender identities, they are abused and punished for doing so.

To make matters even worse, Riley receives another crude message referencing seeing Riley at school. In this one the writer makes a specific reference to seeing Riley at lunch. The mention of a particular time is significant because it is at lunch time that Riley feels most vulnerable to the stares and rude comments of other students.

The LGBTQ meeting to which Bec takes Riley is eye opening because Riley witnesses their own reaction to people who have gender identity issues similar to their own. Riley feels like a bigot for being so caught off guard by the strangeness of the other people attending the meeting. Riley is ashamed of themselves when they incorrectly assumes that a person in attendance is female when in reality, that person is in the middle of transitioning to a male. "I feel a pang of shame; like everyone else, my instinct is to put people in a category" (154-155) Riley observes of their behavior.

Riley's visit to the LGBTQ meeting is also significant because they learn that adults of these sexual orientations suffer even more abuse and bias than teens do. When Riley hears the problems faced by adult people with gender identity issues, they think how insignificant their own problems are. When Riley thinks about how they were able to



research their sexual concerns on the internet, they realize that many of the people in the room with them were teens before the internet was widely used. They had no way to research and learn that there were others like them, much less connect with those people through the internet.

Notice in this section that the author makes an interesting name change when dealing with Jim Vickers. Up to this point, this character was referred to as Vickers, his last name. When Riley sees this boy in the counselor's office he is referred to by his first name, Jim. This switch to the first name is a ploy on the part of the author to make this boy, who is known as a bully, appear more as a student with problems than a cruel boy. When Riley had first seen Vickers in the office Riley had wanted to run away. When Riley saw how Jim's father looked at him and the defeated way that Jim was sitting in his chair, Riley felt sympathy even for the bully.

When Riley sees Vickers' father walk out of the counselor's office and sees the collar he wears, Riley realizes that he is a priest. Riley thinks that it is possible that on the spectrum of bad parents that having a priest for a father would be bad, but could not be quite as bad as having a congressman as a father.

Notice the simile that the writer includes when describing the way Vickers looks as he sits in the chair outside the counselor's office. He is described as "looking like a dog who just had his nose rubbed in his own poop" (138). The idea of Vickers being treated like a dog indicates his father thinks of his son as something less than human. The act of rubbing a dog's nose in poop is a highly degrading way of punishing even an animal.

Discussion Question 1

How does Riley credit the internet for helping them to educate themselves about their gender identity?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Riley is responsible for what happened to Andie?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Riley's reaction to their first meeting with the Q?

Vocabulary

tentatively, alluring, charisma, defunct, cacophony, transcends, resuscitate, reconcile, tangible



Chapters 19-20

Summary

In Chapter 19, Riley feels detached at school as they try to determine who sent them the newest anonymous message they received. They believe it came from one of two sources, it is either a threat from a stranger or it is a message from Vickers. Riley worries that if it is Vickers, he could expose Riley. Other than Vickers, Riley can think of only two other people who might know about Riley's gender fluidity. These two people are Bec and Solo, but Riley cannot figure why either of them would want to hurt them.

Andie's story becomes more popular. She calls for transgender people to come out about their identities. Meanwhile, Riley has a drastic increase in blog followers because a good deal of the media sources reporting about Andie's beating are including references to Alix's blog. Riley cannot bring themselves to log onto the account because they are afraid that they will have more hateful anonymous posts.

One day during lunch Riley tries to tell Bec about their online blog but Solo shows up and Bec suggests they wait to talk. Solo asks to join them for lunch, but there is obvious tension between Bec and Solo. Solo asks Riley what has preoccupied them recently. He chides them for not talking to their friends about what is bothering them. Meanwhile, Bec tells Solo not to include her in any discussions that lump her and Solo together. Bec lashes out at Solo for leaving their group to join the football players, a group of people cruel to the students whom Solo had once considered his friends.

In order to make the peace, Solo suggests that Bec and Riley come to one of his games. He believes it will help them to understand why he likes football so much. If Bec does not think differently about him after the game, Solo tells Bec she does not have to speak to him again. Bec makes a cross offer to Solo. She asks him to come to a club with her and Riley the Friday before the game.

In Chapter 20, there is another fundraiser coming up for Riley's father's campaign. They have been told that they have to attend this dinner. They are anxious about the dinner but also are worried about Bec's decision to invite Solo to the meeting of the Q. Riley is also worried about how to will act when around both Bec and Solo since Riley identifies more as a male around Solo, but has a reaction that they cannot really describe in terms of gender to being around Bec. Riley also continues to stress about the identity of the person who is stalking them.

Riley walks into English classroom to discover Sierra is already there. Riley cannot tell what Sierra is talking about on the phone with her mother, but they can tell that Sierra is upset by her body posture. When Sierra sees Riley, Riley asks if she is okay. Sierra is scratching her arms furiously and tells Riley to mind their own business. Later Riley suppresses the urge to tell Solo about Sierra's problem. Riley decides it is not their place to spread stories about Sierra.



After school, Riley logs onto the Bloglr account. They feel they need to read their messages and deal with the consequences of their advice to Andie. Instead of opening the messages first, however, Riley composes a new post. In it they apologize to Andie. Riley also tells their followers that they do not have the bravery to come out like Andie did.

Riley thinks about all the ways their life might change if they were to go public with their gender fluidity. As Riley thinks about the possible negatives of revealing themselves, Riley considers that perhaps their decision is not just about them any longer.

Analysis

While Riley had gotten more comfortable in their school the bit of security they had developed is destroyed when they get another threatening message from an anonymous source. There is foreshadowing as Riley has suspicions that it is someone at school who is threatening her. More chilling is that Riley suspects that it could be Bec or Solo who is threatening them. Riley reasons these two people who claim to be their friends are the only ones who might have any idea that they are gender fluid or that they have a blog addressing gender fluidity.

Notice that despite how hateful Sierra continues to be to Riley, Riley still treats Sierra with respect. It is another aspect of Riley's personality that seems too good to be true. Riley witnesses Sierra's attitude and body language as she talks to her mother on the phone. Riley also sees Sierra scratching desperately at her arms after having talked to her mother. It is at this point that Riley's suspicion that Sierra uses the scratching as a way to deal with her stress is confirmed.

Even though Riley notices Sierra's troubles with her mother, Riley cannot bring themselves to talk to anyone about what they have seen, even Solo. "I think I just sort of understand what it's like to have a fucked-up secret, and I don't want to be the one who tells someone else's. Not even hers" (181).

Even as Riley stresses about the threats they have received on their blog, their readership continues to increase. Riley is intimidated by the following they have seemed to have collected by default. Riley feels that they have abandoned the people who have gotten inspiration from their posts but at this point in their journey, Riley is still too scared of the hateful messages that might be on the blog to get back on the blog.

Riley does take a step forward in their journey toward bravery when they decide that it would be worse for them to be outed as a gender fluid teen than for them to be threatened. Riley begins to think more seriously about coming out to their parents but still cannot draw up the courage they need to come out.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the interaction between Bec and Solo. How is Bec's hesitation to welcome Solo back as a friend significant?

Discussion Question 2

Near the end of this section, when Riley thinks about coming out to their family, they consider that the decision might not be just about Riley any more. What do you think this means?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think either Bec or Solo are responsible for the threatening messages that Riley is getting? What might be their motivation for harassing Riley behind her back and being friendly to Riley in person?

Vocabulary

vague, detached, scenarios, eradicate, mandatory



Chapters 21-23

Summary

In Chapter 21, when Kanada greets Bec, Riley and Solo at the door Solo kisses her hand, impressing Kanada. Her response of claiming Solo as her own makes Solo blush. During the meeting, Riley experiences a chill when Mike/Michelle acknowledges Andie Gingham for her courage and her bravery. She also mentions that the Trans Health Con is coming up. The conference will feature a panel about online community building. Mike/Michelle has been asked to serve as the mediator for that panel.

The person with the green hair, for whom Riley had been trying to determine a gender speaks during the sharing portion of the meeting. As Morgan speaks, Riley realizes this person is probably as close to Riley in her gender identity as anyone she has ever met. Looking at Morgan, Riley also understands how people must feel when they meet them for the first time.

Although they have to fight off an anxiety attack, Riley shares with the group. Riley says out loud for the first time that they are gender fluid. Solo leans over and tells them that he thought they were something like that. He admits he had been doing some research on “gender stuff” since he met Riley.

After the meeting is finished, Mike/Michelle pulls Riley aside to talk to her in private. She tells Riley that she suspects Riley is Alix from Bloglr. Riley does not answer out loud but they suspects that the way they blush, it tells Mike/Michelle all that she needs to know. Mike/Michelle promises not to share with anyone but asks Riley if they would be willing to be on the panel at the Trans Health Con. Riley feels a tingle that they recognizes not as anxiety but as excitement. Riley tells Mike/Michelle that they will consider the invitation.

In Chapter 22, Riley’s dad invites Riley to go to the office with him the following Saturday. He asks Riley to help him to decide on walk-in music for his fund raiser on Tuesday. They talk and laugh until Riley’s father gets a call that the woman with whom Riley’s father is meeting is on her way. Riley tells their father they will leave because they are going to the football game that night. Her father asks if Bec, the friend with whom Riley is going to the game is a girl or a boy. Riley wonders if that is their opening to talk to their father about their gender fluidity. Riley starts to tell him but then changes the subject.

On Riley’s way out of the office, they meet Felicia Clemente. Riley can see the uncertainty on the superintendent’s face when she asks “And this must be your...” (207) because she cannot determine Riley’s gender. Riley notices their father has become distant, as if he wishes they were not there.



In Chapter 23, as they walk across the parking lot to the football stadium, Bec stops near an old green truck parked in the lot. She tells Riley she is okay with Riley being gender fluid. They hold hands as they walk to the line to buy tickets. They also stop for a supersized soda before climbing the steps to the stadium.

They are halfway up the stadium when they hear Vickers ask the question “Which one is the dude” (210) about Riley and Bec. The others sitting around Vickers make their guesses which is which. It is when Vickers calls them “queer” (211) that Bec turns to him and dumps her drink over him. Sierra stands up and calls Bec a “bitch” (211). When the teacher, Mr. Bennan, asks if there is a problem his question dissolves the argument, but a group of girls stands and applauds Bec for belittling Vickers.

After the game is finished, Riley asks Bec to wait to leave until after most of the crowd has thinned. Riley also asks Bec to explain a play Solo made that seemed to help the team win the game.

When they do make their way across the parking lot, Vickers and his group is still huddled around the same green pickup truck from earlier. Vickers tells Bec if she was a boy he would beat her but that he did not hit girls. Bec questions his attempt at respect, mentioning that even though he did not hit, he felt it was okay to make comments about girls’ bodies. When Bec accuses Vickers of having a small penis, Vickers gets in her face. Riley joins in and tells Vickers to back off. Vickers responds, calling Riley “queer” (217) and Riley attacks, grabbing and pulling his cast. Riley hears something pop and suspects they have rebroken his arm. One of the guys suggests the Riley and Bec “get out of here” (217), which they do.

Analysis

The antagonism between Bec and Riley, and Vickers and Sierra reaches a high point when Vickers begins making harassing statements about the two at the football game. Vickers is the typical bully, he can start trouble and make fun of others but gets angry when the people whom he bullies fight back. Bec and Riley stand up for themselves, something Vickers had not anticipated.

The author continues to avoid making any references to Riley’s anatomical gender. Even when the superintendent with whom Riley’s father works closely asks a leading question wanting to know if Riley is the congressman’s son or daughter, the question is not answered. The reader, as well as the superintendent, is left in the dark about Riley’s anatomical gender.

Riley is especially sensitive to body language. Riley tends to judge the intentions of others based on their body language rather than the words they say. It is Riley’s father’s tone of voice that disturbs Riley most about the encounter with the superintendent. Riley remembers “the cold tone of Dad’s voice; it was like he was trying to distance himself from me” (208). Riley interprets his reaction as an indication that they are a “politically



dangerous thing” (208). While alone, Riley and their father are comfortable together, but once Riley’s strangeness is pointed out to him, Riley sees a change in their father.

When Riley is faced with Morgan, Riley comes to a new realization about themselves and their interaction with others. Riley comes to realize that outsiders look at them just as they are looking at Morgan. Because Riley is gender fluid, Riley does not stare at Morgan because they believe Morgan is an oddity, but because Riley is trying to judge Morgan’s gender identity. When they catch themselves staring at Morgan, Riley wonders of the strangers who stared at Riley with curiosity: “Were they really judging — or just trying to figure me out?” (193). Even Riley cannot determine for sure which gender Morgan identifies with. As Riley tries to assign a gender to Morgan, Riley thinks to themselves that “It’s weird to think that now I’m the one clinging to old ideas” (194).

As soon as Riley addresses the group at the Q, Mike/Michelle recognizes that Riley is Alix. Mike/Michelle tells Riley that they have a gift for words that could be used to help others like them. “Riley — there are so many more Andie Ginghams out there. And they need to hear someone like you” (198-199). Notice that Riley does not answer Mike/Michelle’s question if they are Alix. However, Riley’s body’s reaction - the deep blushing - to her question tells Mike/Michelle everything that she needs to know about Riley.

This section of chapters is significant because it is the first time that Riley publicly announces that they are gender fluid. Even though the setting is very safe with others like Riley there for the statement, Riley still has to battle a panic attack when trying to tell about their gender identity struggle for the first time. Riley’s struggle to share with others is rewarded, however, because Riley tells their reader: “It’s the first time I can remember not feeling a single trace of dysphoria; but, rather than exhilarating me, the realization kind of depresses me, because I think about how much time I’ve spent feeling wrong” (196-197). Riley feels freedom for the first time since realizing there is something different about them.

In addition to the realization of how much Riley has shorted themselves by not coming out sooner, Riley also experiences the feeling of excitement for one of the first times. This feeling of excitement comes when Mike/Michelle invites Riley to participate on the discussion panel at the Trans Health Con.

The old green pickup truck is a significant symbol introduced in this section of the novel. It is a symbol of Vickers. It is in front of this truck, which is parked in the parking lot at the football stadium, that Bec tells Riley that she is not bothered by Riley’s gender fluidity. Later, after they leave the game, Vickers and his gang are standing in front of this truck. It is where Bec and Riley have their showdown with Vickers in which Riley rebreaks Vickers’ arm after he threatens to hit Bec.

Finally, in this section of the novel there are several literary techniques used in the descriptions. In describing their take on the game of football Riley uses a simile to compare some of the players to cats. “They (the players) all try to kill one another while four or five others chase a ball like cats after a laser pointer” (213). There is also a



reference to the Biblical story of how the early Christians were fed to Lions as a spectator sport. As Riley watches the game between their school's team, the Lions, and the visiting team from Anaheim Lutheran, she draws the parallel that in their case, it is the Christians who are eating the Lions. Notice the oxymoron that Riley uses to describe the way they believe they are walking with Bec and Solo. In a situation where Riley wants to match Solo's long masculine steps, Riley also feels thrown off by the indescribable gender signals that they get from Bec. As a result, Riley describes their way of walking as being like a "ballerina ape" (188).

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Bec asks Solo to go to a Q meeting with her and Riley? How does he show his acceptance of the people whom he comes in contact with at this meeting?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the interaction between the superintendent and Riley's father. How does Riley interpret the two adults' opinions of them?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the abuse that goes on between Bec and Riley, and Vickers and Sierra in this section of the novel. Even though Vickers starts the fight, he is upset when Bec and Riley fight back. Is the way that Bec and Riley stood up for themselves the best way they could have handled Vickers' abuse? Why or why not? What sparks Riley's sudden desire to join the fight instead of running from it?

Vocabulary

repulsed, bemused, deftly, prestigious, mediator, scrutinizing, peripheral, nonchalant, caricature, feigns, disassociate, abate, arbitrarily



Chapters 24-26

Summary

In Chapter 24, as they drive away, Riley looks back at the group around the green truck and thinks Erik can be seen among those who are huddled around Vickers. Riley asks Bec if Erik was at the game, and if he is still trying to fit in with the football team. Bec tells Riley that she is not sure and has not really paid attention to Erik recently.

Bec changes the subject and asks Riley if they would like to go to the movies with her. Bec drives to a 7-Eleven and gets snacks — a slim Jim, mini Oreos and grape soda. Back in the car she drives to an abandoned office building. The two climb to the roof where they can see a movie being projected onto the wall of a building facing the one onto which they have climbed.

They watch the movie in silence for a while, and then Bec admits to Riley that she and her sister had come to this building before her sister died. That day would have been her fifteenth birthday. Bec admits she knew about the Q because her sister was transgender. Riley suddenly wonders if Bec's interest in them is only because of their resemblance to Bec's dead sister.

Bec continues, telling Riley how her family had fallen apart when her sister decided to come out. Her sister's death had not been an accident. She had overdosed on medication when she was 13. Bec had blamed herself for her sister's death because she was the one who encouraged her to come out.

In Chapter 25, at home that evening, Riley sorts through the max of 500 messages in her inbox on Bloglr. As they begin deleting their messages, Riley notices that the counter begins increasing to the max of 500 again. When Riley reads the messages, Riley sees the messages are from the anonymous poster again telling Riley that he believes that Riley just wants attention. He tells Riley that no one will love Riley once they discover that Riley is a freak. The poster goes on to suggest that Riley take pills and kill herself. The final messages tell Riley that no one will cry for poor little Riley. Riley is stunned when they see they real name in the poster's comment.

Riley goes into the bathroom and vomits. They cannot breathe and their vision is going dark. Riley begins screaming and hears a crash. Their father's voice calls to Riley, asking what is wrong. As he grabs Riley's arm, Riley realizes that they have punched the mirror in the bathroom. Riley's mother is there also, asking what is wrong.

In Chapter 26, in the car before Riley goes into an appointment with Doctor Ann, Riley's mother tells them that if they do not want to go to their father's campaign dinner they do not have to. Riley is upset because their mother seems to think they had the panic attack intentionally to get out of the campaign dinner.



Riley tells Doctor Ann the story about the football game and even learning about Bec's sister having committed suicide. Doctor Ann tells Riley that she knows there is more to the story. She knows this because Riley's episodes generally have an immediate trigger.

Knowing that they cannot lie to their psychiatrist, Riley tells Doctor Ann that they are Alix, the blogger to whom Andie Gingham reached out. Riley tells the doctor about all of the hate messages they have received, including the most recent ones in which they were called by name.

Doctor Ann suggests to Riley that it is time to deal with the root of their problem, which would require Riley to come out as being gender fluid. Doctor Ann encourages Riley to talk to their parents and tell them what their life is like for them.

Analysis

The suggestions that perhaps Bec is involved in Riley's harassment become stronger in this section. The most damning evidence that Bec might somehow be involved in the harassing messages being sent to Riley are the references to Riley taking pills and killing themselves. This reference is significant since Riley had just learned that Bec's transgender sister killed herself with an overdose. Also worrying about Bec is her brother's continued association with Vickers. Riley believes they see Erik with Vickers the night of the football game. When Riley questions Bec if her brother is still trying to make friends with Vickers, Bec passes off the question.

Significant in Riley's conversation with Doctor Ann is the doctor's admission that she feels responsible for the advice she gives Riley. This admission echoes the way that Riley feels about the people to whom they give advice to through their blog.

Because they have not yet told their parents about being gender fluid, Riley cannot explain to them why they get so upset the night that Riley breaks the bathroom mirror. Riley's parents do not know about the blog or the threatening messages Riley has been receiving. Because Riley has not told their parents about being gender fluid or the blog, they can only assume that Riley is upset because they do not want to go to the campaign dinner. Riley is offended when their mother suggests to them that if they feel that strongly about the campaign dinner, they do not have to go.

An important symbol in this section is the package of mini Oreos that Bec picks up for Riley. Bec chooses this snack for Riley because she knows that Riley is vegan. The snack is significant because it demonstrates how well Bec knows Riley and respects her beliefs.

Discussion Question 1

Why does it matter if Erik were among those with Vickers at the football game?



Discussion Question 2

Why would Bec send harassing messages to Riley? What would be her motivation for threatening Riley?

Discussion Question 3

Why has Doctor Ann not suggested to Riley before that they needed to talk to their gender fluidity with their parents? Do you think this is something that should have been addressed earlier? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

atonal, careen, dubiously, attuned, compels, cascade, liability, impassive



Chapters 27-30

Summary

In Chapter 27, on Tuesday, the day of their father's campaign dinner, Riley notices something strange about their locker when they pass it after lunch. The lock is broken and the books inside are covered with a combination of ketchup and honey. The vandal has cut letters out of magazines to spell out the words "Poor little Riley" (242) on the inside of the door. Riley knows that what they see proves the person stalking them knows exactly who they are and that they attend the school.

Riley is still physically sick from the vandalism when trying to dress for the campaign event that evening. Riley feels their dysphoria more strongly than ever before. Riley is looking at themselves in a mirror when their father steps into the bathroom behind them. He holds three tablets in his hand and tells them that Doctor Ann agreed to let them have extra medication that night if Riley wants it.

It is in that moment that Riley knows they are ready to tell their parents about their gender fluidity. Because of the campaign dinner, however, they know the time is not right. Riley decides that night when they get home will be the time that they will tell them.

Riley is finally able to breathe when leaving for the dinner with their family. When Elias opens the door going outside, however, there is a crush of newspaper reporters and camera flashes. Riley senses something is wrong before they even know what it is. The reporters are all asking Riley's father what he thinks about Riley's lifestyle choices and how it will affect his campaign.

In Chapter 28, even the street on which the Cavanaughs live is clogged with news vans and reporters. Elias helps the family get into the house and then orders the news people to leave. Riley sits with their parents in the family room. Riley is angry because this is not the way they wanted to come out to their parents but realizes they have no choice. Riley explains that they are gender fluid, but their parents stare back blankly. Riley's father looks understanding when Riley tells them that they figured it out the year prior, just before the big campaign event where they had locked themselves in their room.

When their mother asks how the media found out about Riley's sexual orientation before they did, Riley explains to them about the blog. Riley's father is angry because Riley "broadcast your bisexual phase on the goddamn internet?" (254). Riley can tell that their father regrets the words as soon as he has said them. He tries to apologize but Riley tells him that they did not intend to mess up his campaign. Riley had shared their feelings anonymously and had been outed. Before Riley runs out of the house, Riley tells their father, whom they call "Congressman" that what they are going through is not a phase but who they are. Riley's parents call them back and ask them not to leave, but Riley ignores them.



In Chapter 29, Riley drives despite experiencing anxiety and tunnel vision. Riley does not have their cell phone or their ID. They drive to Bec's house and see the green pickup in the driveway. As Riley starts to get out, the driver starts the engine of the truck. It has only one headlight. Riley panics and drives away. When Riley checks the rearview mirror, Riley see the one headlight, but think it is a motorcycle that is following them.

Riley drives to the movie-night spot and tries to climb to the roof but someone has chained the fire escape ladder. Riley pulls the van up to the building hoping to be able to use it to climb up. Riley jumps up but does not reach the ladder. Instead, Riley falls and knocks themselves out when their head hits the windshield.

Riley wakes to the sound of laughter. There is a truck idling and three silhouettes approaching them. One of these shadows belongs to Vickers. When Riley tries to leave Vickers grabs their ankle. Cole assists by grabbing their other ankle. They pull Riley down and bend them over the hood of the minivan. They boys take bets on whether Riley is a girl or boy before they pull down Riley's underwear. Suddenly, there are more lights and the boys assaulting Riley leave. Riley screams when a hand touches their shoulder. It is Solo and Bec. They tell Riley everything will be okay.

In Chapter 30, Solo and Bec take Riley to the hospital. Riley is examined by a doctor and then by a police officer. Riley is given medication to bring on sleep. Riley's father apologizes and asks what he can do. Riley says nothing and the nurse gives them another sedative. When Riley wakes again they learns from their mother that Solo stayed until three in the morning but that they had not seen Bec at the hospital. Riley and their mother make small talk for a while and then Riley starts to cry, clinging to their mother. A nurse finally comes to give Riley a sedative.

When Riley wakes their parents tell them that the police want them to call and make a statement. Riley refuses to do so. They tell Riley that Solo is there to see Riley. Solo starts the visit by offering Riley a Starburst. Riley asks him about Bec. Solo describes the way Bec told him that she had to go as soon as they got to the hospital. He had tried to get in touch with her but she had not responded. Solo stays with Riley until visiting hours are over and the nurse makes him leave.

Before he leaves, Solo apologizes to Riley for telling them that he thought that Riley invited their abuse because of the way they dressed. He explains he had no business telling them that. As a peace offering, he has brought his Chewbacca backpack. Riley refuses to take it because they can tell how much it means to Solo.

Riley also asks Solo how he knew where to find them. He replies that Bec had called him after she saw on the internet what had happened at the fundraiser. He said Bec seemed to know where to go, and that she had been acting strangely, like she knew something bad was going to happen.



Analysis

The action of the novel climaxes in Chapter 27. It is the night of the campaign dinner that is so important to Riley's father. The election is only two weeks away. The Trans Health Con to which Riley has been invited to participate is also just under two weeks away. Three significant things happen in this section. First, Riley is outed to the media. Second, Riley is physically assaulted by Vickers. Third, Riley's locker is vandalized. The message left in the locker is the same one that the poster on put on Riley's blog. The words "poor little Riley" (230) seem to be proof the school vandal and the blog stalker are the same person.

The author continues to give the reader the idea that Bec might be responsible for what is happening to Riley or at least know something about what is happening to Riley. For starters, it is Bec who tells Solo they have to go and look for Riley. She is the one who knows something is wrong even before Solo does. When Riley goes to Bec's house after they try to talk to their parents, Vickers' pick-up is in the driveway. Even though Vickers has been helping Erik with football, the suspicion has been planted in the reader's mind that there is more to the relationship between the two than that.

Later, when Riley talks to Solo in the hospital, he tells Riley it was strange how Bec seemed to know exactly where to go to look for Riley. Solo also points out to Riley that Bec's behavior had been strange. He said she seemed to know something was wrong, and seemed to know exactly where to look for Riley.

The author is very tasteful in the way that Riley's assault is described. He does not describe the attack in detail but gives enough information that the reader understands that Solo and Bec arrived just in time to stop whatever else Vickers and his friends had planned for Riley.

Riley's examination at the hospital seems to be worse for them than the actual assault. Riley interprets what the workers are thinking based on the body language they see. For instance, Riley says of the doctor during her examination: "She frowns as she works, as though she's cleaning up an unpleasant mess" (264). Riley is also upset by the reaction of one of the nurses who is helping the police officer with the rape kit. Riley jumps when the camera flash goes off as the officer takes pictures. The sudden movement knock the kit off a table. Riley notices the nurse "heaves an exasperated sigh as she collects the spilled contents and hurries off to get a fresh exam kit" (264).

While Riley's parents apologize for what has happened and seem to be trying to reconnect it is Solo's apology that seems most heartfelt. Two significant objects are included in this section. The first is the Starbursts that Solo offers to Riley when he first enters Riley's hospital room. In this use, the Starburst is a peace offering, like Riley had described the Starburst they were offered the first time they met Solo. Solo also offers Riley his Chewbacca backpack as a peace offering. Riley refuses to take the backpack because they know how much Solo loves it. He loves it so much that he is wearing it when he leaves the hospital.



What is most significant in Solo's discussion when he talks with Riley is the fact that he goes back on what he originally told Riley about their behavior. He had advised Riley that he thought they invited some of their abuse because of the way Riley dressed. After Riley's assault, he has decided he was wrong in his advice. Solo tells Riley no one should hurt another person just because of the way they dress.

Ironic is that just as Riley decides to tell their parents about themselves, they are outed by whomever is stalking Riley on her blog. Riley additionally learns for herself what Andie felt that night that she reached out to Riley. After Riley had been verbally attacked by their father about their sexual orientation, Riley was stressed enough that they wanted the emotional pain to end.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way Riley's parents react to the news that Riley is gender fluid. How were the circumstances under which Riley had to admit their sexual orientation possibly the worst way the announcement could have happened?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Bec is somehow responsible for what has happened to Riley? Why or why not? Use examples from the book to defend your answer.

Discussion Question 3

What makes Solo decide that the advice he originally gave Riley about the way they invited harassment by their dress, was wrong? Why is it significant that Solo is wearing his Chewbacca backpack when he leaves Riley's hospital room?

Vocabulary

coagulated, errant, audible, constituents, frenetic, subside, recede, contorts, tepid, palpable, culinary



Chapters 31-34

Summary

In Chapter 31, after Riley is dismissed from the hospital they sequester themselves in their room. When Solo comes to visit he tells Riley that he has not seen or heard from Bec. Riley gets the idea that even though Bec has disappeared before, there is something different about this disappearance.

Riley eats with their parents one night and asks why their father is not busy with his campaign. They pretend the troubles that their father is having with his campaign is not Riley's fault. Riley's father tells Riley that they need to talk to the detectives about the assault. Riley turns the tables on their father when they tell him that if he is going to push Riley to not give up on getting the people who assaulted her charged, Riley is going to push him to continue with his campaign.

It is when Riley realizes that they are acting like a victim that they know they have to do something. Riley researches violence against the LGBTQ community, like Doctor Ann had suggested that Riley do. An article about a transgender man who was murdered upsets Riley. Riley wonders why that man's murder did not get more attention by the media. Riley is angry not only at the people who hurt the LGBTQ people, but also becomes angry with themselves because they are not doing anything. Riley suddenly realizes that of all the people who want to talk to them, they want to talk to Bec.

In Chapter 32, when Riley arrives at Bec's house it is so late that Riley goes to the windows of Bec's room instead of ringing the doorbell. Bec is sitting on the floor, looking at a picture of Gabi. She has cut her hair short. Bec admits to Riley that she knew it was Vickers who assaulted Riley. She also believes that Riley's attack was her fault. She knew Erik had stolen Riley's browser history from her computer. Erik, however, was not the one who outed Riley to the reporters, that was Vickers. Erik exchanged the information he got from the computer for a place on the football team. Bec believes it was when they humiliated Vickers at the football game that Vickers decided to get revenge on Riley.

Riley is angry with Bec because she did not tell Riley about Erik's discovery of the blog or the fact that Bec had read the blog. Riley accuses Bec of not liking Riley for herself but instead seeing Riley as a project. Riley voices her opinion that Bec had tried to save Riley because she could not save her sister. Riley screams, kicks things, and pulls a rainbow decal off the wall.

Bec holds Riley, trying to help them compose themselves. Even when Riley tries to kick at Bec and thrashes against her, Bec continues to hold Riley. After Riley is calm again, Bec tells them that she did not know what Vickers was going to do. She had called Solo to help her find Riley because she was afraid Riley might do something to herself.



Riley admits to Bec they had already tried to commit suicide. Riley had taken a bottle of Xanax followed by a bottle of whiskey. They tell Bec about Derek, the boy who was their friend but who had just suddenly stopped being friends with them. Riley also shared with Bec how they had transferred from the private school because some students in their class had cornered them in the locker room and pulled down their pants to discover what gender Riley really was.

When Riley gets home, their parents are relieved to see them. They sit down and talk about Riley and her sexual orientation. They admit they did not learn about Riley's sexual orientation under the best circumstances, but Riley's parents do tell Riley that they want to learn about gender fluidity. They want Riley to help them understand. When they are finished, Riley tells their parents that they are ready to call the police and report their attack.

In Chapter 33, one week after the assault, Riley is in Doctor Ann's office. Riley tells the therapist that Vickers was arrested for the assault. Riley is also able to tell Doctor Ann that Vickers was not the one who sent Riley the threatening messages on the blog. This is significant because it means Vickers would not be charged with as severe a charge. The police, however, were treating what Vickers had done to them as well as the vandalism to their locker as a hate crime.

After Riley and Doctor Ann talk briefly about the way Riley's parents reacted to Riley's gender fluidity, Riley surprises Doctor Ann by telling her that Riley plans to go back to school the following day. Riley tells the therapist they are tired of hiding. Riley also tells Doctor Ann that they have a feeling they will be leaving to go off campus for lunch.

In Chapter 34, on the way to school the next day, Solo tells Riley that the police believe it was Sierra who vandalized Riley's locker. Solo notices how strange Riley reacts. Riley tells him someone was stalking them on their blog and realizes it was Sierra who was doing that stalking as well. Riley comments that Sierra must really be angry with Riley since they got Vickers arrested. Solo tells Riley not to worry about Sierra because some of the guys on the football team had Riley's back. "Anybody tries to fuck with you, they'll wish they were safe in prison" (307) Solo tells Riley.

Once Riley is inside the school building they get a surprise when they learn that Casey, the girl who sat in front of them in French class has decided to come out as a trans boy. He thanks Riley for giving him the courage to come out. Solo waits for Riley outside their French class to escort Riley to where Bec is waiting for them. On the way there, they see Sierra. Sierra is the one who speaks first, telling Riley she did not have anything to do with what Vickers had done. Solo tells Sierra she should be in jail. Riley, however, informs Sierra that they do not plan to change because Sierra does not like who they are. Riley tells Sierra that they plan to talk louder about who they are.

When they meet Bec and Riley begins to think about going through the cafeteria, they have a panic attack. Despite Riley's expectations, there is no huge negative reaction to them being there. Riley notices that there are just people there eating lunch. No one verbally assaults Riley or throws food; no one compliments them or cheers them either.



After this successful walking of what Riley has always thought of as the “gauntlet,” Riley, Bec and Solo leave campus to eat out.

Analysis

This section is significant because Riley learns that while Vickers was the one who assaulted them, it was Sierra who vandalized Riley’s locker and sent the threatening messages on the blog. Riley and Bec also face one another and Bec admits to Riley she knew Erik had stolen information off Riley’s blog.

Courage is an important personality trait in this section. Riley begins developing courage and standing up for themselves. Instead of avoiding Sierra, Riley faces her and tells her that Riley will no longer allow Sierra and people like her to keep Riley from being honest about who they are. Casey also shows courage when he comes out as a trans boy despite the way the people at school treat him. Bec is a character who admits her lack of courage when she tells Riley she did not have the strength to tell Riley that Erik had stolen their browser history and that Bec had read Riley’s blog without telling Riley that she even knew about the blog.

Also for the first time, Riley faces the things that scare them. They stop trying to run from them. Even though they plan to go out for lunch, Riley still faces their fear and walks through the cafeteria before they leave to go off campus. Even though Riley did not have to put themselves through the stress, Riley knows they need to face their fear in order to get better.

The reader also learns that Vickers’ attack on Riley was not the first one they suffered. For the first time, the reader learns that Riley was transferred from Immaculate Conception because they had been held down by students who wanted to see what Riley’s anatomical gender was. What is strange about this admission to Bec is that it seems like Riley’s parents would have questioned why Riley was being abused in that manner by their classmates. It almost appears at this point as if Riley’s parents ignored obvious signs about Riley’s gender issues.

It is also in this section that Riley realizes they no longer want to be a victim. Riley reads stories of a victim who was been killed because they came out. Riley realizes they are lucky to be alive and that they have a responsibility to speak out for those who were killed because of their sexual orientation. It is after Riley talks to their parents and they learn that their parents are accepting of them, that Riley decides they have the strength to talk to the police about their assault. Riley’s willingness to speak up for themselves and others like them results in Vickers being put in jail.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the impact of Casey’s decision to come out as a trans boy. How does it impact Riley?



Discussion Question 2

How does the acceptance that Riley receives from their parents help Riley to be brave about her sexual orientation? Do you think Riley would have reported Vickers was the one who assaulted them if their parents had been more critical of them? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe Sierra should have been arrested for her part in Riley's harassment? Why or why not? Discuss Sierra's reaction to Riley's announcement that they would no longer be avoiding talking about her gender identity?

Vocabulary

nonchalant, berth, pundits, stereotypical, incoherently, waived, terminology, catharsis, reluctant, surreal, emasculated, pneumatic, retort



Chapters 35-36

Summary

In Chapter 35, Riley talks to their parents about the desire to participate in the panel at Trans Health Con. Although they seem concerned about Riley's decision, they seem supportive of Riley when Riley tells them that they believe they owe it to themselves to stand up to the other people like them.

Solo and Bec take Riley to the conference. As Riley walks with Bec into the huge convention center, Riley feels as if they are losing control of themselves. Bec notices how Riley is struggling and helps them to an outside bench. A flash of sunlight hits Riley's eyes and takes them back to their assault. Riley begins to struggle in Bec's hold but Bec continues to hold onto them, and eventually Riley calms. When Riley tries to kiss Bec, however, Bec stops Riley. She tells Riley she does not want their first kiss to be under such circumstances. Bec takes Riley's hand and puts it over her heart and then pulls Riley into a kiss. After they are finished, Bec tells Riley she has standards for the people she dates. Riley personifies those standards.

In Chapter 36, Mike/Michelle tells Riley about the crowd of reporters inside the conference center. She is surprised when Riley tells her that Riley is the one responsible for inviting them because they posted the date and time of the panel on the blog. Mike/Michelle tells Riley that although she will try to keep the crowd in check, she might not have control over them. Riley begins to panic when they think about the throng of reporters after their father's campaign dinner. Instead of dwelling on the thought, Riley walks into the convention center.

One person recognizes Riley as Alix and calls out that name. Mike/Michelle and Kanada escort Riley down the aisle. Riley struggles to keep their composure during the panel. Riley feels unqualified to answer questions as they sit between a professional lobbyist and a woman who runs a gay and lesbian newsletter.

Riley is most qualified to answer the questions about building their online community. Riley describes how their blog took off almost accidentally. When Mike/Michelle asks Riley to talk about the idea there are no other gender identities than just male and female, Riley says that they believe people are too complicated to fit one of two categories.

For their closing comments, Riley reads a blog they posted. Riley tells the crowd that they want the painful things that have happened to them to make sense. They want to be able to make a difference. Riley tells the audience gathered that they had decided to stop hiding.

While Riley is talking, they notice a man slip into the conference room. Even though he is wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap, Riley knows it is their father. Because the



reporters are yelling questions at the panel by this time, Mike/Michelle tells Riley they should just escort them off. Instead, Riley suggests that they try to talk to the reporters.

Once Riley gets the reporters' attention, Riley closes their eyes and takes a deep breath. Instead of the typical black void, there is a light, with a blackboard hanging there. Instead of painting a whiteboard black, Riley imagines herself painting the blackboard white.

Analysis

Riley reconnects with their parents in this section. As they make their case for their parents allowing them to participate in the Trans Health Con panel Riley notices the expression on their father's face. Riley states "after a moment, I'd swear he's trying to suppress a smile" (317). Riley's father makes the ultimate sign that he is trying to understand and support Riley when he attends the Trans Health Con panel to listen to what Riley has to say. Meanwhile, Riley's mother is overjoyed when Riley asks her to go shopping for a new outfit for the panel.

Riley's transformation is complete in this section. Riley has turned into a person willing to stand up for themselves and others instead of trying to hide and blend in. Riley decides to use their experience being bullied and assaulted to help others in a similar situation. Riley realizes with assault that: "The timing is right. The election, the assault, it's all still in the news. I have this little window of time when I can talk into a big microphone. This is my chance to speak up for other people like me" (318).

Riley is finally able to complete the coping exercise that assigned by their therapist. Riley had not been successful at completing this exercise in the past. The whiteboard Riley imagined painting black always began turning white again before Riley could complete the exercise. In this final section when Riley instead imagines themselves painting a blackboard white that they are successful in completing the exercise. In order to be successful, Riley had to find their own unique take on the exercise. Their success shows that they are learning to better handle their anxiety and also that they do not have as much to be anxious about.

Also in conclusion, Bec demonstrates to Riley that she does love Riley. They kiss for the first time. At this point, all Riley's doubts about Bec caring about them just because Bec wanted to Riley to take her sister's place should be cleared out of Riley's mind.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Riley was the one who let all the press know about their participation in the Trans Health Con. How has Riley's character evolved since the beginning of the book?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of Riley's ability to paint the blackboard white. Why does this work when Riley was never able to complete the exercise when they imagined painting the whiteboard black?

Discussion Question 3

How do Riley and her parents connect in this final section of the novel?

Vocabulary

obliterating, continuum, subdued, legitimate, cacophony



Characters

Riley Cavanaugh/Alix

Riley Cavanaugh is a gender fluid teen. Riley is the main character and narrator of this novel. Riley is the only child of Congressman Cavanaugh and his wife.

Because Riley's sexual orientation fluctuates between the feminine and masculine, the author is careful not to reveal what sex Riley was at birth. For this reason Riley is referred to by the gender neutral pronouns "they" or "their" when references are made to Riley. It is important that the reader relate to Riley as a person, not as a boy or a girl.

Riley is six when they first realize their father thinks there is something unusual about their interest in toys specific for both genders. It is not until Riley is 15 that they learn that there is a term to describe the way they relate to gender. It is shortly after Riley makes this realization about themselves that they attempt to commit suicide.

Riley spends time in a psychiatric hospital and is sent home with a regimen of medication and counseling to help relieve their anxiety. Riley's parents arrange for Riley to transfer from the private Catholic school they had once attended to a public school. The novel begins with Riley's first day at public school. Riley hopes that they will be able to blend in with the students at public school better than those at private school.

Unfortunately, Riley is bullied at the public school just like they were at private school. Riley also makes friends with Solo, a boy on the football team, and Bec, a girl whom Riley had mistaken for a boy when Riley first saw her.

At a counselor's suggestion, Riley also starts an anonymous blog. Riley finds the blog a good way to relieve anxiety. Additionally, Riley begins to rank up followers, especially after Riley advises a trans girl -Andie - who was beaten by her father when she went back home to her parents after they reacted badly to her acknowledgement that she was trans. Andie's story was repeated in many news sources. All of these news sources mentioned Riley's screen name, Alix, and the words they had written to Andie.

Riley's blog experience goes bad when some students at their school discover the blog. Riley is outed as Riley. Riley's mother and father are shocked and Riley's father is angry with Riley, prompting Riley to run away from their house.

Riley winds up at a spot where they and her friend Bec had once visited. Riley is followed by Vickers, a boy from the school who bullied Riley and two of his friends. The boys assault Riley. It is after the assault that Riley decides that they no longer want to act like a victim. Riley agrees to participate in a panel at the Trans Health Con about creating an online community for LGBTQ people. Riley sees their father enter the conference center where they are talking. Riley takes his presence as being a sign of his support.



Jim Vickers

Jim Vickers is the main bully at Park Hills High School. He is a member of the football team and is dating Sierra Wells.

Vickers does not hesitate to call Riley offensive names and even goes so far as to ask if Riley is a male or female. He is the one who verbally assaults Riley and Bec when they attend the football game together.

Vickers manipulates other students into doing as he wants with promises of popularity. Erik is one of the students who believes that Vickers can get him onto the football team if he does favors for Vickers. One of these favors includes getting the browser history off Riley's computer.

After Riley and Bec confronted Vickers after the football game, Vickers decided to use the information he had about Riley to his advantage. He was the one who told the press about Riley's blog and arranged for them to surround Riley and Riley's family after the campaign dinner.

Vickers follows Riley to the movie night spot, where he assaults Riley. He is later arrested for the assault.

Although Vickers is a bully for most of the novel, there is one scene where he is presented as being intimidated. This scene takes place when Riley sees Vickers waiting outside the counselor's office. Even though he sees and recognizes Riley, he had nothing hateful to say to Riley.

Riley sees that Vickers' father, who had been talking to the counselor, gives Vickers a sharp look when he leaves the office. Riley also notices that Vickers' father is wearing the collar of the priest. Although Riley believes Vickers probably will deserve whatever punishment he will get, Riley still sympathizes that he has a priest as a father. Riley imagines it would be almost as bad as having a congressman as a father.

Francesca “Bec” DeLucca

Francesca, most often called Bec, the nickname she gave herself, is the second person at Park Hills High School who befriends Riley. She is Erik's sister.

Because Bec dresses in a way that is ambiguous, Riley at first believes that Bec is a boy. Bec wears mirrored sunglasses, a lip ring and a peacoat. Bec has dark shoulder length hair.

Bec's sister was transgender. For this reason, Bec recognizes Riley's problems rise from Riley's unconventional gender identity. She takes Riley to a meeting of the Q so that Riley can have a support group.



Despite her attempts to help Riley, Bec believes it was her fault that Riley was assaulted. When Riley questions Bec after the assault, Bec tells Riley that Erik had stolen Riley's browser history when he tweaked Riley's computer. Erik gave the information he found on the computer to Vickers as a favor to get on the football team.

Bec had caught Erik looking at Riley's blog the night that she and Riley had studied together. She had thought Erik had completely erased everything he stole from Riley's computer. Bec swore she did not know that Erik still had a copy of the information off Riley's lap top until after Riley had been outed.

Throughout the course of the novel there is sexual tension between Riley and Bec. It is while Riley is preparing to participate in the panel at the Trans Health Con that Bec admits her affection for Riley.

Jason “Solo” Solomona

Solo is the first person whom Riley befriends when she transfers to Park Hills High School. Solo is a member of the football team but had to survive his own bullying before he was accepted on the team.

Solo defies categorization because he does not adopt the mindset of the football players even though he earns a spot on the team. When Riley first realized Solo was on the team, Riley had thought that Solo would begin turning his back on Riley as a friend, like the other football players did.

Riley is surprised that Solo lets Vickers treat him the way that he does. Solo seems to take the attitude that there are some things, like his Chewbacca backpack, that he has to give up to fit in, while others things, like his love for Star Wars, are things he will not sacrifice for others.

When their friendship was new, Solo told Riley he thought that Riley invited the abuse they endured because of the way they dressed. At the end of the novel, after Vickers' assaults Riley, Solo goes back on what he said to Riley. He tells Riley that Vickers had no right to treat Riley the way he did.

Congressman Sean Cavanaugh

Congressman Sean Cavanaugh is Riley's father. During the time period covered by this novel the congressman is running for reelection. Because of the way Riley's secret of gender fluidity is outed, he loses his campaign.

It was during a trip to a toy store with their father that Riley realized there was something different with them. Even as a six year old, Riley had noticed the look on their dad's face when he asked Riley to choose between a traditionally female toy and a traditionally male toy, and Riley couldn't decide.



Although Sean had been frustrated with Riley and Riley's troubles at school, he seems to come around after the assault. He wears a baseball cap and tries to disguise his height, but Sean shows his support for Riley by attending the Trans Health Con where Riley is speaking.

Sierra Wells

Sierra Wells is the girl who calls Riley an "it" on the first day of school. She is the girlfriend of Vickers and is as cruel as he is.

Even though Sierra is cruel, Riley feels some compassion for her because she notices the way that Sierra compulsively scratches her arms, to the point she leaves scabs on her arms. Riley also picks up on the fact that Sierra's mother makes Sierra's life miserable.

Sierra is discovered to have been the one who vandalized Riley's locker. Riley puts together the clues and realizes the Sierra was also the one who sent the threatening messages anonymously on Riley's blog.

Sierra is questioned about her involvement in Riley's assault but it is never indicated if she was charged with any crimes.

Mike/Michelle Weston

Mike/Michelle Weston is the curator of QueerAlliance.org. She also leads the therapy group, the Q, to which Bec takes Riley.

Mike/Michelle is the one who asks Riley to take part in Trans Health Con. She recognizes Riley as Alix by the way that Riley talks to the members of the Q.

Mike/Michelle is a transgender woman. The only time she does not present as a woman is when she and her son are together in public. She had agreed with him to dress as a man when they are together.

Mike/Michelle goes by the double name because she knows it is a good way to encourage discussion.

Andrew "Andie" Gingham

Andie Gingham is the transgender girl who reaches out to Riley, known as Alix, on her blog site. Andie had just come out to her parents but her admission of being transgender was accepted very badly by them.



Through her blog, Riley, as Alix, encourages Andie not to end her life but instead go back and talk to her parents. When Andie does go back home, her father beats her badly enough that he puts her in the hospital.

Although many people accused Alix of getting Andie hurt, Andie thanked Alix for providing the courage to keep on living and to face her parents again, despite the assault she suffered.

Morgan

Morgan is one of the people who attends the LGBTQ meeting to which Bec takes Riley.

When Morgan tells their story during a meeting, Riley realizes that Morgan is probably a person who has a gender identity closest to Riley's.

It is while looking at Morgan that Riley realizes what it must be like for people when they see Riley for the first time and wonder what gender they are.

As critical as Riley is of the people who openly question their gender, Riley realizes that they also were curious about what gender Morgan was when they first saw them.

Sharon Cavanaugh

Sharon Cavanaugh is Riley's mother and Sean Cavanaugh's wife. Sharon works as a school teacher and prides herself on the food that she cooks for her family.

Riley senses that her mother gets as nervous as Riley does when it comes campaign activities. Riley picks up on their mother's anxiety because they see their mother chewing her fingernails and taking antacids, especially when her husband is actively campaigning.

Casey Reese

Casey Reese is the girl who sits in front of Riley in their French class.

Casey strikes up a friendship with Riley but it is not until after Riley admits that they are gender fluid that Casey comes to school dressed as a boy. Casey tells Riley that it is because of Riley's bravery in coming out that gave Casey the courage she needed to reveal that she identified as a male.

Doctor Ann

Doctor Ann is Riley's therapist. For most of the novel, Doctor Ann is the only person with whom Riley has one-on-one contact who knows that Riley is gender fluid.



Doctor Ann is the one who suggests that Riley start an anonymous blog to help Riley reach out to others in the LGBTQ community and relieve themselves of some anxiety.

Erik DeLuca

Erik DeLuca is Bec's sister. He is the one who discovered Riley's blog on Riley's computer when he tweaked it so Riley could get on the internet at their house.

Erik gave the information he found on Riley's computer as a favor to help get himself a spot on the football team.

Gabriel "Gabi" DeLuca

Gabriel "Gabi" DeLuca was Bec's sister. She was transgender.

At some point in time before Riley met Bec, Gabi killed herself by taking an overdose of medication. Gabi's family had fallen apart when she came out as a transgender. In a note, Gabi told them she believed they would be better off without her.

Elias

Elias is the man who works as head of security for Congressman Cavanaugh and his family. Riley describes him as being "bald and burly" (202).

Dr. Amala

Dr. Amala is the doctor who examined Riley after they were sexually assaulted by Jim and the other football players.

Officer Dinning

Officer Dinning is the police officer who questions Riley after they were assaulted by Jim and the other football players.

Grady and Cole

Grady and Cole are the two other boys who are with Vickers when Vickers sexually assaults Riley.

Kanada

Kanada is a transgender adult who attends the Q meetings. She is known for her long arms and passionate hugs.



Symbols and Symbolism

Strawberry Starbursts

These strawberry Starbursts are a symbol of Solo and his friendship with Riley. When the two first meet in the English classroom Riley helps him pick up these pink candies that have spilled out of his backpack. He offers Riley one of these candies and Riley gets the feeling it would offend Solo if they did not accept the offer.

Bratz Doll

This Bratz doll represents the female range of Riley's gender. It was one of the two toys six-year-old Riley chose when their father allowed them to pick a toy on their own at a toy store.

Blue Power Ranger

This blue Power Ranger represents the male range of Riley's gender. It was one of the two toys six-year-old Riley chose when their father allowed them to choose a toy on their own at a toy store.

Pirates of the Caribbean Board Game

This Pirates of the Caribbean board game is the safe choice on which Riley settled when they were allowed by their father to pick out a toy at a store. Riley felt the previous choices, a Bratz doll and a Power Ranger, were not safe choices because of the look their father had on his face when he looked at the conflicting gender specific toys Riley had chosen at first.

Bag of Mini Oreos

The bag of mini Oreos that Bec chooses for Riley as a snack is a symbol of how well Bec knew Riley. She knew that Riley was a vegetarian and would not want a stick of beef jerky, the snack that Bec chose for herself.

Solo's Chewbacca Backpack

Solo's Chewbacca backpack is a symbol of his love for Star War and also a symbol of the way he was bullied when he first arrived at Park Hills High. After Riley was assaulted, Solo offers this backpack to Riley as a gift. His offer is a sign of how much he likes Riley.



Green Pickup Truck

This green pickup truck is a symbol of Vickers. It is this truck against which he is leaning after the football game when he confronts Bec and Riley. This truck is also at Bec's house the night that Riley is assaulted.

Bule Notre Dame Baseball Cap

This blue Notre Dame baseball cap is a symbol of Riley's father. When Riley sees a man wearing this hat enter the conference hall where the Trans Health Con is taking place, Riley knows it is their father who has come to listen to them speak.

The Whiteboard

In a coping mechanism, Riley is advised to try to paint this imaginary whiteboard black. The exercise does not work for Riley. It is only when they imagine painting a blackboard white that Riley is able to successfully complete the exercise.

The Magazine Letters Pasted to Riley's Locker

The magazine letters in Riley's locker symbolize bullying. It is when Riley sees that a vandal has pasted the cutout magazine letters spelling out "POOR LITTLE RILEY" inside the door of their locker that Riley knows for sure that it is someone in their school who has discovered their blog.



Settings

Park Hills High School

Park Hills High School is the high school to which Riley transfers after having attended a private school where they were bullied by other students. It is at Park Hills High that Riley endures most of the bullying.

Ramp Behind Auditorium

Riley discovers this ramp when they look for a place to hide from the students who are saying crude things about them. Bec leaves her lunch table and goes to introduce herself to Riley when she sees Riley run for the ramp. The two spend their lunch periods on this ramp because it is private and away from the bullies.

The Reagan Years

The Reagan Years is the name of the arcade and soda fountain to which Solo takes Riley the first time they skip school together.

Park Hills Community Hospital

Park Hills Community Hospital is the place to which Riley is taken after Riley is assaulted by Vickers and his friends.

Bec's House

It is at Bec's house that Erik gets access to Riley's computer and hacks onto their blog site.

Riley's Bedroom

Riley's bedroom is the place where Riley begins their blog, writes the blog posts and checks the messages they receive.

Outside the Campaign Venue

It is as Riley and their parents are leaving the final fundraiser that they are confronted by reporters who question the congressman and his wife about Riley and Riley's gender fluidity.



The Movie Night Spot

Bec takes Riley to this movie night spot on their third date. She tells Riley that she and her sister had once come to this spot together. It is also on the roof of this abandoned building that Bec told Riley how her sister had killed herself because she was transgender.

Riley returns to this spot the night that their gender identity was outed to the media. Vickers and his friends followed Riley to this spot and assaulted them.



Themes and Motifs

The Dynamics of Parent-Teen Relationships

Communication is an important facet in parent-teen relationships as demonstrated in the novel *The Symptoms of Being Human*. A good deal of the friction between Riley and their parents comes from a lack of communication. Riley additionally is sensitive to body language and facial expressions. They interpret a good deal of information from their parents' body language.

One of the biggest sources of friction between Riley and her parents comes because Riley cannot work up the courage to tell their parent that they are gender fluid. For example, Riley's father does not like the way they dress because he thinks Riley looks sloppy. He is exasperated when Riley comes home and tells him that the other students have made fun of them because of the way they dress. His attempt to make a point to Riley about their mode of dressing only makes their anxiety worse. Riley's father feels that Riley is being unreasonable. Riley, on the other hand dresses as they do in order to look gender neutral. Had Riley told their parents about their gender fluidity from the beginning, they would at least have the comfort of their parents understanding why they dressed as they did instead of their parents just thinking they were being difficult.

Because Riley has not yet told their parents they are gender fluid Riley also cannot tell them about the blog they have started and the difficulties that have arisen from that blog. Riley stresses because one of the transgender teens to whom they responded was beaten when she returned home to her parents. Riley cannot talk to their parents about this source of stress because they do not know Riley is gender fluid. Riley also cannot talk to their parents about the threats they have been receiving through the blog for this same reason.

Because Riley is very sensitive, they receive a good deal of input from their parents's body language and facial expressions. For instance, on the night of the congressman's fundraising dinner Riley interprets their parents reaction to the news that they are gender fluid as negative based on body language. When their mother sits next to Riley on the couch, Riley notices she leaves a "small but noticeable gap between us" (251). Their father, meanwhile, "his jaw is set, his cheeks white" (253). Even though their mother is more sensitive to Riley's feelings and interpretations than Riley's father, Riley still gets enough negative input from both of their parents that they interpret their parents are not going to be accepting of her admission.

After their parents have time to get used to the idea that Riley is gender fluid, they show signs of being much more accepting of Riley. Riley and their mother go shopping for an outfit for Riley to wear to the Trans Health Con and bring home an outfit that is not too masculine nor too feminine. Riley's mother is overjoyed to have someone to shop with. Riley's father shows his acceptance of Riley by attending the panel at the Trans Health Con. He wears a hat and sunglasses so he is not easily recognized but he pleases



Riley just by being there. When he notices Riley looking at him, he gives Riley the hand sign of rock 'n' roll devil horns to show his support.

The Development of One's Identity

Defining one's identity is important, especially for teens. Riley struggles to develop their identity without drawing attention to themselves. In the teen world, identity is developed by how one dresses as well as the clubs or groups with which one associates. In order to keep themselves safe, Riley tries to associate only with people whom they believe will accept them. There are some people whom Riley meets that make Riley realize that judging based on looks, dress and associations can lead one to incorrect assumptions about a person.

Before Riley comes out as being gender fluid, their life is consumed with acting and dressing in a way that will keep them "safe" from bullying and verbal assaults. Riley chooses clothes that will not appear to be either too masculine or too feminine. Even on the days Riley feels feminine and wants to wear feminine clothes, or vice versa, they fight those urges because they know that the students will pick up on the change and it will draw attention to them.

Riley also has methods by which they determine which people they believe will be safe to associate with and which ones will be unaccepting of them. For instance, Riley has stereotyped the football players as being students who will be cruel to them. Additionally, Riley has also decided that the blonde girl who sits in front of them in their French class is a person of whom Riley should be wary.

Through the course of this novel, Riley learns that their stereotypes of people do not always hold up. Solo, for instance, is a football player but he winds up being one of Riley's best friends. He even stands up for Riley in front of his football friends. Casey, the blond girl who sits in front of Riley in French class, turns out to be transgender. Even though Riley had thought Casey's questioning of them was suspicious and wondered about Casey's motivations, Riley realizes that Casey was interested in Riley because she saw that the two had their gender insecurities in common.

Riley also learns how confusing it must be for others who meet them for the first time to determine their gender because even Riley confuses the gender of some of the people they encounter in the course of the novel. First of all, Riley misses the fact that Casey is transgender. Riley also thinks Bec is male when Riley first sees Bec. It is only after Riley realizes that Bec has breasts that Riley sees Bec is a girl.

Morgan is the person that most completely defies Riley's stereotypes. Morgan, who appears to be gender fluid as well, helps Riley to see themselves as others see them. Even though Riley does not like people staring at them, even out of curiosity, Riley cannot help but stare at Morgan in an attempt to determine with what gender Morgan identifies. Even though Riley does not want to be put into a box when it comes to



gender, even they find themselves stuck in tradition, trying to determine what gender label to put on Morgan.

The Prevalence of Violence toward the LGBTQ Community

One serious aspect to which this book draws attention is the prevalence of violence toward people who are members of the LGBTQ community. Andie is one character who is badly beaten for coming out as being transgender. Riley notices a newspaper report about a transgender man who was murdered. Riley also suffers their own share of abuse because they are gender fluid.

Because Riley's father is a congressman, their assault is widely publicized. Even before this physical assault, Riley was verbally assaulted for being different from the other students at school. Even at their private Catholic school students cornered them in the locker room and pulled down their pants to see what their anatomical sex was. The author's commitment to not revealing what Riley's anatomical sex is seems to be his way of telling his readers that a person's sex is not what is important about them or what defines them as a person. All people deserve respect and kindness regardless of the sexual orientation.

The assault that seems to upset Riley the most is that of Eduardo, the 18-year-old who is killed by his ex. Even though the trans man was murdered, Riley realizes there was no big story or headline about what happened to him. Riley also realizes that they are lucky because they survived their assault. It is perhaps at this point that Riley begins to realize they have a responsibility to speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Andie's beating by her father is another assault that influences Riley's decision to speak for others in the LGBTQ community. Andie's parents are hateful to her when she first comes out as being transgender. She contacts Riley from the train tracks where she is considering killing herself. Riley asks her not to do so and to keep in mind that Andie's parents might just have been so surprised by the news and were already regretting the way they responded. When Andie does go back to her parents, however, her father beats her so badly she has to go to the hospital.

Through his novel, the author's intent seems to be to draw attention to the LGBTQ community and the unfair abuse they sometimes suffer. He makes the point that these people do not choose to be the way they are just like a person of a particular race does not choose to be a member of that race. Physically hurting someone or making fun of them because they are different are types of assault that should never happen.



The Mechanisms Riley Uses to Cope

Riley's psychiatrist teaches them a variety of mechanisms to cope with their anxiety. Some of these techniques work better than others. Among these techniques are deep breathing, medication and acceptance. The blog that Riley starts is another coping mechanism that the psychiatrist suggests. There is a final coping mechanism, painting an imaginary whiteboard black, that does not work for Riley until they put their own spin on the mechanism.

Deep breathing is the coping mechanism that Riley uses most frequently when they feel an anxiety attack coming on. These breaths, which they call Doctor Ann breaths, help calm Riley and get more oxygen in Riley's blood. The breaths are a way of combating anxiety that Riley can do without anyone noticing what they are doing.

A coping mechanism that Doctor Ann suggests but that does not work well for Riley is the act of practicing acceptance. Riley gets caught up on this right away because they are not sure who they are supposed to accept. Riley does not feel they should have to accept the people who make fun of them just because they are different. Riley is right for not allowing this abusive behavior to become acceptable.

Medication is another coping mechanism that does not work as well for Riley as some might think. First, they are not allowed to have control of their medication so they cannot take it when they feel they need it. Second, Riley admits the Xanax does not really do anything to relieve their anxiety. It just makes them feel less concerned about their anxiety.

Another coping mechanism that Riley attempts regularly but does not really work out for them is painting a whiteboard black. In this exercise, Riley is supposed to imagine a whiteboard in their mind. They are to imagine themselves using a brush and black paint to paint this whiteboard black. Riley is never able to completely finish this exercise. Just as they finish "painting" the board, white begins to show through the black on the other side.

It is not until Riley comes up with their own twist to this exercise that they are able to successfully complete it. It is while Riley is speaking at the Trans Health Con that they imagine themselves painting a blackboard white that Riley is able to complete the exercise. This could symbolize the idea that Riley needed to paint a more positive color, white versus black, in order to truly finish the exercise. It could also represent Riley's decision to make something positive out of their situation that calms Riley enough that they are able to complete the process of painting the blackboard white.

Importance of Making a Difference

Once Riley decides to live their life in a way that will make a difference to others, their life seems to take on more meaning and more direction. Their story demonstrates the importance of living not just for one's self, but also in a way that helps others. Riley is



less anxious and more centered once they determine a cause and begin to live their life in a way that they are a survivor and not a victim.

When the novel opens, Riley thinks about nothing but how to protect themselves from the jeers of their fellow students. They hope to be able to blend in and disappear. By the end of the book, Riley has decided that they want to make a stand to help others like her.

Part of Riley's transformation is sparked by their psychiatrist who encourages Riley to find a cause. Although they have not realized it, Riley has already found their cause when they begin their blog. They are encouraged by the amount of support they find in the online community. Riley is also surprised when they receive feedback from Mike/Michelle telling them that they have a natural gift for using words to teach and encourage people.

When Riley begins learning how badly people who are members of the LGBTQ community are treated they become angry. After their own assault, Riley realizes that they have the opportunity to stand up for themselves and others like them. Riley takes their stand by participating in a Trans Health Con panel in which they tell others that they are not going to hide any longer.



Styles

Point of View

This story is told from the first person point of view of Riley, a gender fluid teen. The use of the first person point of view is significant because it allows the story to be told with no references to Riley's gender. Had the story been told from the view of a third person narrator, some pronoun reference to Riley would have to be made, either through a gender specific pronoun referring to Riley's anatomical sex or through the gender neutral pronoun "they."

Since Riley keeps their gender fluidity hidden for so much of the novel, there really would have been no adequate way for any other character in the novel to have told Riley's story. Had any character than Riley, including a third person omniscient narrator, told the story the reader would not have felt as close to Riley. There would have been a distance between the reader and Riley.

There are two audiences that Riley addresses as they narrate the novel. The larger audience is the reader of the novel. A second audience to whom Riley addresses their writing are the people in their blog audience.

Language and Meaning

The language in this novel is intended both to be respectful to members of the LGBTQ community and be respectful of their differences. The use of pronouns, particularly gender specific pronouns, are particularly significant. Instead of being referred to by the gender specific pronoun that would match a person's gender, the reader learns that members of the LGBTQ community prefer to be referenced by the gender pronoun specific to the gender with which they identify. Andie Gingham, for instance, is a trans girl. Although Andie was anatomically a boy, Andie is referenced as a "she."

Riley's blogs are also significant in the language they use. Riley uses a good deal of terms to describe differences in sexual orientation between the straight and LGBTQ communities. Riley explains the differences between the binary model of gender (people must be either male or female) and their own gender fluidity, in which they fluctuate between feelings of being male and feelings of being female.

Structure

This novel is not so much plot directed as it is information directed. Riley's story of bullying, and their own realization that they needed to be brave for others like them is intended as an encouragement for people like Riley. Riley goes from being a teen afraid of letting the world see who they are to one who is willing to stand up for themselves and speak out in public.



The action in the novel begins to rise when Riley gets the first crude anonymous post on their account. Riley continues to be stressed out about the posts on the account and wonders if someone at the school they attend is the one sending them the messages.

The climax of the novel comes when Riley and their parents are confronted outside the campaign venue. Later that night, Riley is assaulted by Vickers and his friends. The falling action comes as Riley decides to participate in the Trans Health Con. The denouement comes when Riley realizes that their father has come to the conference to support them, a sign that he accepts them.



Quotes

The first thing you're going to want to know about me is: Am I a boy, or am I a girl?"
-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: Riley introduces the major challenge in their life in this first quote from the novel. This quote is directed toward the people who might read a blog that Riley has been advised by their therapist to start for therapeutic reasons. This statement lets the reader know that Riley acknowledges that others are troubled by them because they cannot immediately discern if Riley is a boy or a girl. This questions remains unanswered through the course of the novel. The author is careful not to reference Riley's anatomical gender.

If he asks why, what am I going to say? That I'm my father's political pawn? Or that I was trying to escape from a place where I was harassed and bullied on a daily basis? Charming small talk for a first conversation."
-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 2)

Importance: When talking to Solo on the first day of class, Riley wonders how they should respond if he continues to question why Riley transferred to public high school. Riley does not really want to tell Solo the truth but is not sure what they should tell him.

But after my six-week stint of 'recovery' at Pineview — which sounds like a quaint hotel in the mountains, but is, in fact, a psych hospital about an hour away — my weekly follow-ups with Doctor Ann, and my carefully administered cocktail of antidepressant and antianxiety meds, I'm supposed to be better now. I'm supposed to be able to function. So I know it's only a matter of time before they ask again."
-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: Although Riley hates the responsibility of going to campaign events with their family, they know that since they are supposed to be better, they will soon be asked to start attending these events again. This quote also gives Riley the chance to tell the reader about their psychiatric background as well as the combination of drugs they are being given for depression and anxiety.

The truth is, some days I wake up feeling more "boy" and some days I wake up feeling more "girl." And some days, I wake up feeling somewhere in between. It's like I have a compass in my chest, but instead of north and south, the needle moves between masculine and feminine."
-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: Riley describes how their feelings of gender are not stable but instead fluctuate as if on a dial. Riley feels sometimes like a boy, sometimes like a girl and sometimes like a gender somewhere in between feminine and masculine.



But instead, they got me — something they don't quite understand and tend to handle alternately like a glass figurine and a feral cat.”

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: Riley describes how their parents treat them as if they cannot quite connect with them. At times their parents seem to think they might break Riley while at other times they seem to avoid Riley as if Riley is somehow a possible danger to them.

We ended up getting some stupid Pirates of the Caribbean board game; I was disappointed, but I could tell from my dad's body language that it was a safe choice. And that's what I've been trying to make my whole life.”

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 5)

Importance: The Pirates of the Caribbean board game is an important symbol in the novel because it represents the safe choices that Riley believes they have to make in order to please the people around them, including their parents.

I'm supposed to close my eyes and picture the whiteboard. I'm supposed to paint it black with my mind until there's nothing left but a calm, quiet void.”

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 6)

Importance: Riley describes the calming technique that their therapist has taught them in which they are supposed to imagine they are painting a whiteboard black. Even though Riley is not able to complete this activity before the board begins to turn white again, Riley indicates that the activity does sometimes calm them. It is not until Riley visualizes painting a blackboard white that Riley is able to successfully complete this exercise.

My eyes are blurred with tears, and I draw one still-numb hand across them to clear my vision: the figure standing before me is the pale boy from Government I saw sitting with the Hardcores yesterday — the one with the long nose and the lip ring.”

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 6)

Importance: Before Riley knew that Bec was girl, Riley mistakenly identified Bec as a boy.

I think you assume everyone is going to be your enemy. And by doing that, you sort of make it come true.”

-- Solo (Chapter 11)

Importance: Solo indicates to Riley that Riley's belief that others will make fun of Riley because of Riley's appearance is a self fulfilling prophecy.

Then a nervous laugh escapes me, and I shake my head; I'm just being paranoid. Bloglr is anonymous. There's nothing anyone could use to connect Alix the blogger with Riley the congressman's kid.”

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 12)



Importance: Even before Riley realizes that Erik had discovered their anonymous blog when he set up their computer for internet the night Riley visited to study with Bec, Riley imagines what might happen if the blog were connected to them. Riley tries to calm the paranoia by telling herself there was nothing on her blog that could connect them to it.

You think I wouldn't rather lounge around in sweats all day?' Dad says. 'Believe me, I would. But you have to dress for the life you want. Is this how you want to live?' He stops, pulls a hand out of his pocket, and makes a dismissive gesture at me. 'Is this who you are?'"

-- Sean Cavanaugh (Chapter 12)

Importance: Believing that the way Riley dresses is the root of the problems Riley is having in school, their father gives them a lecture on the way their entire life could be determined by the way they present themselves through clothing. Because Riley feels that they are already sacrificing who they are by how they dress, Riley listens until they can stand their father's lecture no longer. It is at that point that Riley screams at him to shut up.

As for wondering if it's okay to be who you are — that's not a symptom of mental illness. That's a symptom of being a person."

-- Doctor Ann (Chapter 13)

Importance: During a therapy session, Doctor Ann tells Riley that everyone, to some extent, wonders if it is okay to be the person they believe they are.

This blog is the truest part of me. If I delete it, if I erase any record of who I am, what will be left?"

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 15)

Importance: Because Riley is afraid someone who knows them has connected the blog to them, Riley considers deleting the account to keep from being outed. Riley chooses not to do so because they believe they would be giving up the only venue in which Riley can be themselves because she was afraid someone might find out about them. Riley also knows that giving up the blog would be allowing the stalker to get the best of them.

People are okay one on one. But get them in groups, and they start adopting this hive mind."

-- Bec (Chapter 18)

Importance: After Bec joins Riley several times for lunch on the ramp behind the auditorium Riley asks her why she abandoned her lunch table. Bec admits to Riley that she is bothered by the way people tend to expect the others in the group to think alike.

Some paint me as a dangerously irresponsible child who put Andie at risk; others cast me in a much more positive light, as some kind of anonymous, gender fluid celebrity."

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 19)



Importance: After Riley sends Andie advice via her blog, Andie does not kill herself, but she does go home to her parents and is beaten badly by her father. While some people support Riley for the advice Riley gave Andie, some blame Riley for what happened to the transgender teen.

There aren't words for what I feel, because all the words were made up by people who never felt like this."

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 20)

Importance: Riley makes a valid point about the words available to them to describe the way they feel about their gender identity. They are not able to properly describe what they feel simply because there are no words to express what they feel.

I look at the trace of lip gloss, the green hair protruding from the back of the baseball hat — and all at once, I understand what it must be like for someone else to see me for the first time."

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 21)

Importance: As Riley tries to determine the gender of a person with green hair at the Q meeting, Riley realizes how confusing it must be for people who see them for the first time. Just as Riley cannot get a grasp on the gender of this person because of the gender neutral dress, Riley understands other people have trouble getting a grasp on Riley's gender identity.

You think I don't feel the pressure of your campaign every minute of every day? You think I don't know I'm just a PR problem to you? I changed schools for you. I wear this for you. I hide who I am for you. I go to the doctor and take the right pills and I did not broadcast this! I shared myself anonymously, and somebody fucking outed me!"

-- Riley (Chapter 28)

Importance: When Riley's father attacks Riley for causing trouble for his campaign, Riley explains to him all of the things they have gone through in order to help his campaign. Riley argues it is not their fault someone hacked the blog account and told the media about the blog.

She was acting weird. I mean, I was worried, too — but she was freaking out, like she knew something bad was going to happen.' He looks up at my IV pole. 'She was right.'"

-- Solo (Chapter 30)

Importance: Solo tells Riley that he and Bec had been able to find Riley and stop the attack because Bec seemed to know where Riley would be. This statement by Solo indicates that Bec might have been involved in what happened to Riley.

I can't fight the feeling that this is all my fault. That I caused this. That somehow, I provoked him to do this — I don't want to think of his name — by humiliating him in front of his friends, by rebreaking his arm. By refusing to just be normal."



-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 31)

Importance: Riley, like most victims, cannot help but think that their assault might have been their fault because they somehow provoked Vickers.

How is it possible that a murder like this happened so close, and that I never heard about it on the news? Why wasn't this a headline?"

-- Riley as Narrator (Chapter 31)

Importance: Riley is outraged when they learn that a trans man was murdered just down the street from where they lived, in a place they had driven by several times. Riley wonders why there was no publicity about the murder.

Erik hacked your computer. He found out about your blog."

-- Bec (Chapter 32)

Importance: Bec explains to Riley how Riley's blog was discovered by Vickers and Sierra. Erik had discovered the blog when he tweaked Riley's computer the day of their study date at Bec's house.

I didn't know Vickers was going to do what he did. But . . . I thought you might do something."

-- Bec (Chapter 32)

Importance: Bec tells Riley that she got in touch with Solo because she was afraid Riley might do something to hurt themselves after it was made public that Riley was gender fluid.

The timing is right. The election, the assault, it's all still in the news. I have this little window of time when I can talk into a big microphone. This is my chance to speak up for other people like me."

-- Riley (Chapter 35)

Importance: Riley agrees to speak at the Trans Health Con because it was a time when the attention was already on the issue of Riley's gender fluidity as well as the assault that had been perpetrated against Riley.