



The Art of Being Normal

Books Reviewed:

[The Art of Being Normal](#) [1]

Issue:

[210](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Around 200 pages in, David says to a fellow pupil, 'I read somewhere that most schools have at least two transgender pupils...I always assumed it was a made-up statistic, to trick kids like me into feeling less of a freak. I never in a million years guessed the other one would be you.' I've no idea whether that statistic is made-up either, but there's good reason to trust Lisa Williamson, the author of this debut novel, in part because her CV includes work at **The Gender Identity Development Service**, a specialist NHS provision 'for young people struggling with their gender identity'. The experiences she listened to there lend authenticity to the novel; and beyond that, readers will surely trust her empathy, evident in this story told through the voices of David and Leo, whose alternating narratives are set in contrasting type faces.

The action occurs in and around life at Eden Park School, a state secondary in a well-to-do area. It's there that David meets Leo who, as we eventually learn, has been sent to Eden Park after a calculated, but all-too-plausible episode of humiliating bullying at Cloverdale, a very different comprehensive on a bleak estate on the other side of town. The two characters are, in one sense, travelling in opposite directions. As we learn on page 1, David has known since primary school that 'I want to be a girl'. Now he's fourteen, and time's running out. So far, only his close friends Essie and Felix are in the know; like David, they couldn't care less about keeping in with the popular crowd. They're both strong and witty. The humour and warmth of their friendship with David provide some high-spirited comic relief from the malice and name-calling ('Freak Show' being the most prevalent) most of the other students throw at David, and indeed at Essie and Felix themselves. For his part, Leo hides his female body, keeps himself to himself around his new school as a boy who's not to be messed with; he's further on his path than David, since he already goes to a specialist clinic in London and meets regularly with a counsellor.

The plot is ultimately positive, without diminishing how difficult David and Leo's journeys are. As in many school-based teenlit stories, the high points include a party, getting totally like pissed, and the Christmas Ball; Stuff Happens as feelings run loose. In each set-piece, though, Williamson avoids cliché - there's even an alternative ball set in a derelict Victorian public baths. Adults turn out not to be the stereotypes they so often are in adolescent fiction. True, when a hopeful Leo seeks out his estranged father, he's callously rejected in minutes; and at first, daily life in the working- and middle-class homes of Leo and David implies the conventional, insensitive adults. But when love and support are really needed, circumstances force the best from their confused but loving parents.

How this book will play with readers would be fascinating to explore (PhD, anyone?). For those on comparable journeys, it will surely be a rare find. Might they, you'd like to know, think Leo and David are more fortunate than many in the way things are turning out for them? As I write, today's paper brings news of plans to open an LGBT school within Manchester's local authority; sustained bullying, resulting in intense suffering, even suicide, is a major factor driving the planners' thinking. Teachers in such a school and workers in LGBT Centres will surely welcome this title, but you'd hope for a far wider readership. If readers with that mid-teen curiosity about gender discover this book, it might well be something of a revelation, a disturbance. Lisa Williamson - and David Fickling, to whom the children's book world again has reasons to be thankful - well deserve that.

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Links:

- [1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-art-of-being-normal>
- [2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/210>
- [3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>