

MELISSA



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PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS **GEORGE**
ALEX GINO


Juvenile

By Alex Gino

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Book Summary:

A fourth-grade boy begins to tell people he is a transgender girl.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains alternate gender ideologies including transitioning commentary; inexplicit non-sexual nudity; and alternate sexualities.

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Teen Guidance
BookLooks Review Rating

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7	<p>If George were there, she would fit right in, giggling and linking her arms in theirs. She would wear a bright-pink bikini, and she would have long hair that her new friends would love to braid. They would ask her name, and she would tell them, My name is Melissa. Melissa was the name she called herself in the mirror when no one was watching and she could brush her flat reddish-brown hair to the front of her head, as if she had bangs.</p>
9	<p>“Sorry if I busted in on you while you were taking a dump.” Scott wiped the juice off his lips with his bare forearm. “I wasn’t taking a dump,” George said. “Then what took you so long?” George hesitated. “Oh ... I know,” Scott said. “I’ll bet you had a magazine in there.” George froze, her mouth half-open and her brain mid-thought. The air felt warm and her mind swirled. She put her hands on the table to make sure she was still there. “That’s it.” Scott grinned, oblivious to George’s panic. “That’s my little bro! Growing up and looking at dirty magazines.” “Oh,” George said out loud. She knew what dirty magazines were.</p>
13	<p>“My point is, it takes a special person to cry over a book. It shows compassion as well as imagination.” Ms. Udell patted George’s shoulder. “Don’t ever lose that, George, and I know you’ll turn into a fine young man.” The word man hit like a pile of rocks falling on George’s skull. It was a hundred times worse than boy, and she couldn’t breathe. She bit her lip fiercely and felt fresh tears pounding against her eyes. She put her head down on her desk and wished she were invisible. Ms. Udell returned with the bathroom pass. It was a worn wooden block from a kindergarten class and read BOYS in thick green permanent marker on one side. ...She stumbled, sobbing, into the bathroom—the boys’ bathroom.</p>
14	<p>George hated the boys’ bathroom. It was the worst room in the school. She hated the smell of pee and bleach, and she hated the blue tiles on the wall to remind you where you were, as if the urinals didn’t make it obvious enough. The whole room was about being a boy, and when boys were in there, they liked to talk about what was between their legs.</p>
15	<p>George gathered her things slowly, stalling as long as she could before joining the boys’ line.</p>
17	<p>“I want to be Charlotte,” George whispered. Kelly shrugged. “That’s cool. If you want to be Charlotte, you should try out for Charlotte. You make such a big deal out of everything. Who cares if you’re not really a girl?”</p>
22	<p>“Trying out for Charlotte. Ms. Udell will love that you care so much about the character that you want to play her onstage, even though she’s a girl and you’re a boy. Plays are all about pretending, right?” “Um ...” was all George could say. Playing a girl part wouldn’t really be pretending, but George didn’t know how to tell Kelly that. ...“Of course it is. There’s a whole history of boys playing girls in thee-ay-trah. Did you know that all the characters in Shakespeare’s plays were played by men? Even the girl parts. Even when they had to kiss! Can you believe it?”</p>

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	George thought for a moment about kissing a boy, and the idea made her tingle. Living in Shakespeare’s time didn’t sound so bad, even if you had to poop outdoors.
28	While Mom made dinner, George headed upstairs to take a bath. She took off her shirt while the tub filled, waiting until the last possible moment to take off her pants and underwear. She immersed her body in the warm water and tried not to think about what was between her legs, but there it was, bobbing in front of her.
29	<p>Mom, what if I’m a girl?</p> <p>George had seen an interview on television a few months ago with a beautiful woman named Tina. She had golden-brown skin, thick hair with blond highlights, and long, sparkling fingernails. The interviewer said that Tina had been born a boy, then asked her whether she’d had the surgery. The woman replied that she was a transgender woman and that what she had between her legs was nobody’s business but hers and her boyfriend’s.</p> <p>So George knew it could be done. A boy could become a girl. She had since read on the Internet that you could take girl hormones that would change your body, and you could get a bunch of different surgeries if you wanted them and had the money. This was called transitioning. You could even start before you were eighteen with pills called androgen blockers that stopped the boy hormones already inside you from turning your body into a man’s. But for that, you needed your parents’ permission.</p>
30	Someday, somehow, George would have to tell Mom that she was a girl. But this was not that day. And as for how, she had no idea.
36	“I still don’t see what the big deal is,” Kelly said. “So you want to play a girl onstage. It’s not like you want to be a girl.”
37	George opened her mouth, but as with Mom, she couldn’t say the only words that blared through her brain: I’m a girl.
41	Maybe if the girls were terrible enough, Ms. Udell would be so relieved that George was good that she wouldn’t care that George wasn’t a girl. At least, not a regular girl.
53	<p>“They’re jerks,” said Kelly. “You’re not a girl.”</p> <p>“What if I am?” George was startled by her own words.</p> <p>Kelly drew back in surprise. “What? That’s ridiculous. You’re a boy. I mean”—she pointed vaguely downward at George— “you have a you-know-what, right?”</p> <p>“Yeah, but ...” George trailed off and looked at the ground. She kicked a small rock that skipped into a tuft of grass. She didn’t feel like a boy.</p>
58	Being a secret girl was a giant problem.
61	<p>Kelly took a deep breath. “And I’m sorry I ignored you last week.” She scratched her neck. “And you know what? If you think you’re a girl ...”</p> <p>George braced for Kelly’s next words.</p> <p>“Then I think you’re a girl too!” Kelly leaped onto her best friend and gave her a hug so big they both nearly toppled over.</p> <p>...“So you’re, like, transgender or something?” Kelly whispered as best she could in her excitement. “I was reading on the Internet, and there are lots of people like you. Did you know you can take hormones so that your body, you know, doesn’t</p>

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	<p>go all manlike?”</p> <p>“Yeah, I know.” George had been reading websites about transitioning since Scott had taught her how to clear the web browser history on Mom’s computer. “But you need your parents’ permission.”</p> <p>“Your mom’s pretty cool,” Kelly said, her eyebrows lifted. “Maybe she’d be okay with it.”</p> <p>...“Sometimes transgender people don’t get rights.” George had read on the Internet about transgender people being treated unfairly.</p>
71	<p>A sign in the far corner showed a large rainbow flag flying on a black background. Below the flag, the sign said SUPPORT SAFE SPACES FOR GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH.</p> <p>Reading the word transgender sent a shiver down George’s spine. She wondered where she could find a safe space like that, and if there would be other girls like her there.</p>
72	<p>In the bathroom, George combed her hair forward. If she squinted at the mirror, she almost looked like a girl. For now, anyway. Today her skin was smooth, but someday testosterone would grow a terrible beard all over her face. Scott had already started to sprout awkward tufts under his chin.</p> <p>...“George, I’m going to be honest. I worry about you. There are a lot of kids like Jeff out there, and plenty who are worse.” Mom blew a puff of air up at her bangs. “I mean, being gay is one thing. Kids are coming out much earlier than when I was young. It won’t be easy, but we’ll deal with it. But being that kind of gay?” Mom shook her head. “That’s something else entirely.”</p> <p>“I’m not any kind of gay.” At least, George didn’t think she was gay. She didn’t know who she liked, really, boys or girls.</p> <p>“Then why did I find all those girls’ magazines in your closet?” Mom raised an eyebrow, and a curved wrinkle formed across her forehead.</p> <p>George drew in a deep breath, held it, and let it out. Then another.</p> <p>“Because I’m a girl.”</p>
76	<p>“Look, do you want your mom to know you’re a girl?”</p> <p>“Yes.”</p> <p>“Then be Charlotte.” Kelly said it as if it was choosing strawberry ice cream instead of chocolate.</p>
78	<p>“Did you tell her you were gay?” Scott twisted his fork into a pile of mashed potatoes. “You know I’m okay with that, right? Before Dad left, he made me promise to take care of you. He said you were like that.”</p> <p>“I’m not gay,” George said. Why did everyone think she was gay?</p> <p>“Whatever. I don’t care. My friend Matt is gay. It’s no big deal.”</p> <p>But it was a big deal. “I told her I think I’m a girl.”</p> <p>...“Ohhh.” Scott took a bite of turkey. “Ohhhhhhhhh.” Scott began to nod slowly. He turned to George, whose stomach had jumped with each oh and was now nearly in her throat.</p> <p>“That’s more than just being gay. No wonder she’s freaking out.”</p> <p>“I know.”</p> <p>Scott put down his fork. “So do you?”</p> <p>“Do I what?”</p>

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	<p>“Think you’re a girl?”</p> <p>“Yes.” George was surprised at how easy that question was to answer. ...“I know about your magazines,” he said.</p> <p>“Mom told you?”</p> <p>“Naw, I found them this weekend. I knew Mom was upset about something, and then I saw the bag sitting on her bed. Dude, I thought you had porn or something in there, so I took a peek. You know, just to find out what kind of stuff my little bro was into. So I figured you were gay. But I didn’t think you were like that.”</p> <p>Scott popped a corn fritter into his mouth. “So, like, do you want to”—he made a gesture two fingers like a pair of scissors— “go all the way?”</p> <p>George squeezed her legs together. “Maybe someday,” she said.</p> <p>“Weird. But it kinda makes sense. No offense, but you don’t make a very good boy.”</p>
86	<p>“You were totally like a girl.” Kelly took George’s hand, one of the real ones. “I mean, you totally are a girl.” Kelly hugged her best friend tightly.</p>
89	<p>A bit of Charlotte’s confidence still coursed through her. “I already told you. I’m a girl.”</p>
93	<p>“You could always call me Melissa,” she said now.</p> <p>“Melissa,” said Kelly, her eyes wide. “I like it. That’s a great name for a girl.” She said it again, drawing out each sound. “Me-lis-sa. That’s perfect!”</p>
95	<p>She pulled George toward her and hugged her tight. “You really do feel like a girl, don’t you?”</p> <p>“Yeah, I do. Remember that time I was little, when you found me wearing your skirt as a dress?”</p> <p>“Yes.”</p> <p>“And remember how I wanted to be a ballerina and it drove Scott crazy because he said I couldn’t because I was a boy?”</p> <p>“I remember the temper tantrum you threw when I didn’t get you a tutu.”</p> <p>...George knew that seeing a therapist was the first step secret girls like her took when they wanted everyone to see who they were. “And then maybe I could grow my hair out and be a girl?”</p>
98	<p>And she wondered what Kelly’s uncle Bill would be like. If he was as clueless as Scott, he would never notice that George wasn’t a regular girl. If he did notice, George wasn’t sure whether he would be nice. Kelly said he was nice, but Kelly had been wrong before. He might laugh at George. He might even leave her at the zoo. Still, there was no way she was going to pass up this chance to be a girl with Kelly.</p>
100	<p>“I didn’t even know you had any skirts,” said George.</p> <p>“I don’t wear them to school. Boys are dirty and try to look up them.”</p> <p>“I’d never try to look up your skirt.”</p> <p>“Of course not. You’re not a boy.”</p> <p>“Oh, right.” George laughed. Even she was sometimes fooled by her body.</p>
102	<p>“What if your uncle figures out I’m not really a girl?” Melissa asked.</p> <p>“Look at you. Why would he think you’re anything else?”</p> <p>Kelly was right. Melissa’s frame was thin, and she was too young to be expected</p>

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	to have curves. She was wearing girls' clothes and a girl's hairdo, even if it was short. She really did look like a girl.
103	<p>"It's just ... I'm wearing boys' underpants." Melissa felt the wide band of elastic around her waist that held up her white boys' briefs. No one would be able to see them, but she would know all day that they were there.</p> <p>"Ew! Yuck! Pull them off!" Kelly was already at her dresser drawer. She handed Melissa a pair of light-pink underwear covered in tiny red hearts. They were small and light. "You can have them. Don't worry. They're clean."</p> <p>...Melissa took off her own underwear, stepped into Kelly's, and pulled it up under her skirt.</p>
106	<p>When they stepped out of the World of Insects, Kelly said she needed to use the bathroom. Melissa tensed. There was no way she could make it back home without going as well. She looked down at her skirt. She couldn't go into the boys' bathroom looking like this.</p> <p>"Melissa and I will be right back," Kelly announced, grabbing her best friend by the hand before she could protest, dragging her right to a door with a sign with the word LADIES and a stick figure wearing a triangle skirt. Kelly pushed open the heavy metal bathroom door as if it were nothing and pulled Melissa in.</p> <p>... Melissa locked herself in a stall, delighted for the privacy. She lifted her skirt to see her underwear, covered in tiny red hearts. She pulled it down, sat, and peed, just like a girl.</p>
113	<p>What I can say is that I didn't grow up with any positive representations of transgender people in books or other media. The first time I encountered the word genderqueer (meaning "neither a boy nor a girl"), I was nineteen, and I took that word and I consumed it—ate it and became it, because it was already me. I can only imagine how my life would be if I had seen someone more like me in a book or three when I was younger.</p>
114	<p>George is a name the main character does not like or want to use for herself. What we call people matters and we all deserve to be referred to in ways that feel good to us. And even though she isn't real, the name of my book made it seem though it's okay to call someone by an old name, which it's not.</p> <p>...Didn't you show your book to queer and transgender people as you were writing it?</p> <p>A: I sure did, probably at least a dozen. It's hard to overstate how quickly culture has been changing with respect to its awareness of transgender people, especially transgender and gender nonconforming kids. The word deadname to describe calling a transgender person by a name that they don't use anymore was first used in 2012. The concept existed within queer communities earlier, and the term itself is questionable (not every transgender person wants to think of part of themselves as dead.) However, respecting transgender people by using their correct name without also mentioning their old name has only become common in mainstream media starting in about 2015, the same year Melissa released.</p>
115	<p>I promise, nothing about the title of this book has been about confusing people, though I will note that names can be more complicated for transgender people than for most.</p>

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116	<p>And if you find yourself using a different pronoun, check in with yourself about that, since the narrator never varies on that.</p> <p>Melissa is a transgender girl. If you are talking with someone who doesn't know what that means, you can say that she is a girl who the world sees as a boy, or a girl who was assigned male at birth. You can also say that she is a girl, but she's the only one who knows it. Notice that all of these say first that she is a girl. Also note that transgender (or trans) is an adjective, not a noun. That means you always need a noun after it, like transgender woman.</p> <p>Avoid the phrases trapped in or stuck in when talking about trans people. I'm not stuck, as if in mud, and my body isn't wrong. It's just not what you thought it might be. Phrases like feels like or identifies as aren't so great either. They sound as though who trans people are is up for debate or discussion. It's better to say "is." Generally, if it sounds weird saying it about a cisgender (non-trans) person, it's probably not good to say about a trans person. Do you "identify as" your gender? Or is it just who you are?</p> <p>Please be aware that language for trans people is developing and changing as our community grows and matures, questions the ways that we have been talked about, and explores alternatives. And the same words don't work for everyone. For example, some trans people do consider themselves to be in the wrong body. Be open to developing and changing language.</p>
117	<p>I mean, what are your pronouns?</p> <p>... In fact, if you are asking someone their pronouns because you're not sure, it's polite to extend the question to others around, even if you're pretty sure you know them, so that you're not putting one person on the spot. You can also check in on someone's pronouns if you're not sure you have them right, even if you've known the person a while. The person's pronouns may have changed.</p> <p>I use the singular they and the honorific Mx. (pronounced "mix"). For example, you might write this about me: When Mx. Gino finishes this FAQ, they will send it to their editor and then eat a piece of chocolate. While some grammarians balk at the idea of the singular they, linguists tend to recognize its place in our language. And if there's someone reading this who thinks they haven't encountered the singular they before, they should know that they have—three times in this sentence alone.</p>
118	<p>Melissa is a binary trans girl, which means that she is a girl even though she was assigned male at birth, and she will grow up to be a woman. I'm genderqueer, or nonbinary, so I'm neither a girl nor a boy. Also, Melissa is growing up with access to the Internet and information about being transgender.</p>
119	<p>Melissa's success has already far surpassed anything I could have imagined. When I started writing Melissa's story, I hoped I might be able to convince a small, queer publisher to take it on. More likely, I thought that I would be distributing hand-stapled photocopies to local LGBTQIAP + organizations.</p> <p>...To learn that children and whole classes are reading Melissa's story is astonishing.</p> <p>...My ultimate dream is that Melissa becomes historical fiction. I want to live in a world where people read this book and wonder why Melissa's transness is such a big deal.</p>

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	<p>...Q: I think I might be transgender (or gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, etc.). What should I do?</p> <p>A: First of all, be proud that you're figuring out who you are. And remember that you don't need all the answers today, and the answers can change. If you can access the Internet, you can read up on as well as connect with other LGBTQIAP+ people.</p>
122	<p>Melissa is only one story. It is the story of a white, middle-class transgender girl growing up near New York City, written by a white, middle-class genderqueer person who grew up on Staten Island, New York. Every transgender story is different, just as we are all different. Race, money, disability, and other realities further impact these differences.</p>