

Thinking Beyond Pink and Blue

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What exactly does "gender fuck" mean?

According to Cameron, an aspiring doctor and activist, "Gender fuck is blending stuff, having something girl and something boy and something neither."

Well, now you know.

Cameron and the five other transgender young adults who are profiled in Susan Kuklin's newest nonfiction work for teens, *Beyond Magenta*, have to create new gender terms. The old ones won't work for them. They must grapple with stuff as seemingly arbitrary as pronoun usage as well as the complexities of sexuality, gender, and identity.

Gender fuck, indeed.

At the same time, Jessy, Christina, Mariah, Cameron, Nat, and Luke are like so many other boys and girls their ages. They doubt. They feel uncomfortable in their bodies and that adults don't understand them. They worry about relationships and looking good and dream of glittery, beautiful futures. "Transition? Everyone goes through one kind of transition or another," said Mariah. "We go through transitions every day. Except mine is maybe a little more extreme."

Author and photographer Kuklin has a history of tackling weighty topics in her books for teenagers. In *No Choirboy*, she wrote about adolescents on death row. *What Do I Do Now* covers teen pregnancy. She has published volumes on child slavery, AIDS, and the American justice system. With *Beyond Magenta*, she joins the small circle of authors who have written about transgender concerns or characters for a young adult audience. Within that tiny community, her book offers something new. Using a combination of photos and words, it allows readers to glimpse into the lives of real teens who must negotiate transitioning in the real world. *Beyond Magenta* is Kuklin's most ambitious work to date and the one with the most of her in it. "This is my story too," Kuklin said. "To pretend that I'm not there didn't seem as honest."

Finding the Characters

Beyond Magenta, which will be published Feb. 11, 2014, could be mistaken for a coffee-table book. The glossy cover features a fashionable young person wearing a bright pink button-up, black bow tie, rainbow belt, and baggy jeans. The interior is clean, bright, and carefully designed. However, this is not a book to browse. It is one to take in.

Each chapter is told from the first-person perspective of one of the teens. Their experiences have similarities: Many were bullied, many were confused, and many felt trapped in bodies that did not belong to them. But their stories are also as different as their photographs. Some had supportive families and friends. Some did not. Some have arrived at a peaceful place of self-acceptance. Some are still searching. "I've always been interested in limitations," said Kuklin. "What about the wall when you're in your own body?"

The veteran author, who lives in New York City with her husband, wanted to assemble a group of introspective young people to profile in *Beyond Magenta*. With the help of the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center in Manhattan and the Wisconsin-based Proud Theater (a nonprofit group composed of LGBT kids and their allies), she met six individuals who were willing to sit through multiple interviews and long photo shoots.

As a group, they are racially diverse and come from a wide range of economic, religious, and social backgrounds. Mariah (who asked not to have her picture in the book "because I'm not comfortable with my body") was raised by her grandmother in a poor neighborhood. Jessy is Thai; he and his family moved to the U.S. for his diplomat dad's job. Christina grew up in a Catholic household. At home, Nat's family spoke Spanish and English. Cameron is from Westchester County, but "not one of the rich, white Westchester towns you hear about." And Luke lives in Wisconsin with his two parents and older sister.

Each teen has a reason (some many) to be wary of adults.

Christina, who began her transition while at an all-boys Catholic school, had problems with her high school teachers and was punched by a man in her neighborhood. Mariah's mother once "almost killed" her by throwing beer bottles at her head.

So why did these six young people trust Kuklin? What did she do that allowed them to feel safe enough to speak openly about painful memories, sex, mental illness, violence, and heartache?

"There's just one word," she said. "And that's 'listen.' I listened to them. I didn't challenge them. I didn't judge them. I just listened to them."

Kuklin made it a point to call me back after our initial conversation to further explain. "They know in advance that I am not out to do an exposé." It also helped that adults whom the teens *did* trust recommended Kuklin and that she asked for their input as the project

progressed. When it came time to finalize the title, they offered their opinions. Cameron didn't like the original, but *Beyond Magenta*, a concept from one of Luke's poems, received a universal "yes."

*They told me
No.
Said, 'What are you?' said, 'you gotta choose'
said, 'Pink or blue?'
and I said I'm a real nice color of
magenta*

A Theater Kid Running (Just a Little) Wild

As a teenager growing up in Philadelphia, Kuklin wanted to be an actress. Her parents were not on board. Referring to the subjects of *Beyond Magenta*, Kuklin said, "I related to the kids, because I relate to people whose parents might not approve of them. I think all kids have that."

Kuklin describes her childhood as "very normal." She didn't have siblings, but she and her cousins were close. Her favorite books included *Little Women*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and the Nancy Drew series, and "Judy Blume's novels made it easier for me to write nonfiction." Her Russian grandmother read her fables in translation. Her life was full of art, theater, dance, and music.

Like any "very normal" adolescent, Kuklin had moments of rebellion. In high school, she would cut class and hop the train for New York City. There she'd go to a show or visit with actor friends she'd met during summer-stock theater. Steve McQueen (aka "The King of Cool") was a "good buddy," Kuklin said. But he wouldn't let her ride his motorcycle. It was too dangerous.

Kuklin recalls her hooky days as amazing learning experience — maybe they were even more of an education than school. "I shouldn't say that," she said. But she did, and her wistful tone betrayed how much she meant it.

Kuklin fell into photography after her uncle bought her a camera, and becoming a writer was a natural transition from a youth spent on stage. Training as an actress helped Kuklin hone her empathy. It taught her how to inhabit another's person's skin.

The State of "T titles"

"While there are a lot of teen books that deal with gay and lesbian teens now, there is a serious lack of books that deal with more marginalized groups within the LGBTQ community — teens who are trans, HIV positive, queer, sex workers, polyamorous, or even bi," wrote

transgender activist, teen librarian, and YA editor Jackson Radish in an email exchange. "Books that deal with more marginalized LGBTQ groups are in the same place that general LGBTQ teen fiction was 10 or 15 years ago."

Both Radish and youth librarian Kyle Lukoff (who is a self-described "member of a sprawling swath of queer and trans people who think about this stuff ad nauseam") lament the quality of the few "T titles" for teens that do exist. "The specific lack I see of T titles is, for one, that the most well-publicized titles are written by well-meaning cis people who research what it's like to be trans, rather than writing fiction grounded in an authentic lived experience," wrote Lukoff in an email.

Arguments about quality and authenticity aside, there's evidence to suggest that the world might second Radish and Lukoff's call for more T YA lit. Kirstin Cronn-Mills' *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*, a novel about a teen who was born as Elizabeth and wants the world to accept him as Gabe, won the American Library Association's 2014 Stonewall Award. David Levithan's *Every Day* is a *New York Times* best-seller. Its story revolves around a character known only as "A" who wakes up in a different body each morning. A has no gender. A is every gender. A's life is a "gender fuck." T Cooper and Allison Glock-Cooper's *Changers*, which will also be published this month, takes place in a "post-gender and post-sexuality" society. So is now the golden age for YA lit that introduces intricate understandings of gender identity?

Not completely.

Take, for example, Kelly Huegel's *GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens*. This 2003 title is currently on the Parents Protecting the Minds of Children's "Twenty Shocking Books at Fayetteville, Arkansas School Library" list. Amy Sonnie's *Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology* made the American Library Association's (ALA) "Top Ten Challenged Books" list in 2010. Michael Cart's *Love and Sex: Ten Stories of Truth* and Levithan and Billy Merrell's *The Full Spectrum: A New Generation of Writing about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Other Identities* have also been challenged or outright banned from libraries and schools.

Though *Beyond Magenta* has received three-starred reviews to date, its publisher, Candlewick Press, is preparing for the possibility that Kuklin's new title will also have to overcome obstacles in order to get into readers' hands. "We are definitely ready," said Kuklin's editor, Hilary Van Dusen. "We expect it. When I signed this book up I knew what I was in for."

As for Kuklin herself, she said, "I guess I'm trying to prepare myself...I guess you're never really prepared."

Kuklin's good friend Robie Harris, whose book *It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health* has been on the ALA's "Top Ten Challenged Books" list multiple times, compares children being told to not read certain books to admonishing them not to put peas up their noses. If you forbid it, they're going to find a way to do it anyway. "It's the book that matters," said Harris. "Maybe I'm an optimist, but those books find their way to many, many, many people."

Nonetheless, being an optimist doesn't mean that Harris isn't worried about the young people who need to find books like *Beyond Magenta* but can't.

“I Want My Story to Help”

Regardless of the challenges *Beyond Magenta* may face, its six subjects are hopeful that their stories might aid other teens, whether they are transgender, straight, gay, poor, rich, or just trying to understand experiences different from their own. In an email from Thailand, Jessy wrote, "We are no different from other teenagers that are looking for love and support while trying to discover who they are in such a diverse and complicated world."

Like Jessy, Kuklin dreams that *Beyond Magenta* will reach a wide swath of readers. She wants for it to be a means through which all teens can realize that "we're not all the same. There's much more fluidity in sexuality and in gender."

As for Jessy, Christina, Mariah, Cameron, Nat, and Luke, Kuklin has dreams for them too. "I hope they find love. I hope their families will understand and cherish them for who they are," she said. "I think we all want that."

Chelsey Philpot teaches writing at Boston University. She has written for the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Slate*, and numerous other publications. Her first YA novel, *Even in Paradise*, will be published September 2014. [Follow her on Twitter.](#)

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