

Alex Bertie's *Trans Mission: My Quest to a Beard* (2017)

Review

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“If you can take just one thing from this book, let it be to not waste another second of your life being someone you’re not. There’s a life beyond waiting for treatment or acceptance. We only get one shot at life, so get out there.”

Alex Bertie is a British YouTube vlogger with a decade of candid videos which focus on LGBTQ+ topics and document his gender transition. His debut memoir, published during Transgender Awareness Month by Wren and Rook (a non-fiction imprint of The Hachette Children’s Group introduced in 2017), forms part of a visually creative collection of ‘personality-led’ titles for young adults. *Trans Mission: My Quest to a Beard* gives Bertie’s account of his adolescence, and of his female-to-male transition. Introducing himself, Bertie writes: “I’m not good at first impressions, but screw it: here we go. My name is Alex Bertie. I like pugs, doughnuts, and retro video games. I have tattoos, I make videos and I sleep with my socks on. I’m also transgender” (9). With an endearing narrator, *Trans Mission* makes for a thoroughly entertaining read, but beneath its amusing and accessible surface is a text of emotional complexity. It contains, in Bertie’s words, the “real stuff,” “[t]he emotions, the practicalities, the self-doubt,” and “the stuff they can’t cram into 60 mins and which doesn’t create a provocative headline” (11).

Starting with his earliest years, Bertie explains that, when he was born on 2nd November 1995, he was categorised as female by the doctors. But, despite formally identifying as female throughout his childhood, at 15 he came to realise that he was a transgender man and began his ‘quest to a beard’. Central to the memoir is his battle to overcome debilitating body dysphoria, something he describes as “the whole reason [he] needed to transition” (9). Not only does the memoir speak about this struggle, but with chapters devoted to childhood, puberty, dealing with bullies, college, physical transition, dating, job hunting and much more, *Trans Mission* follows Bertie’s ongoing journey of self-discovery and maturation. Through retellings of his own heartache and distress, Bertie invites the reader to consider both the specific challenges and broader issues faced by trans teens. Though he reiterates that this memoir details only with his own experience, and that each person’s experiences are different, lessons of tolerance, acceptance and self-love are inferred from his memories.

Educating the reader appears the paramount objective for *Trans Mission*. The narrative is interwoven with definitions of trans-specific terminology and repeatedly invites the reader to refer to the glossary for further information, making it a broadly accessible read for those who may have less familiarity with trans matters. The first chapter, ‘Let’s Get Some Things Straight,’ sets out the distinction between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation, constructing a framework of knowledge as a lens through which to consider Bertie’s (and others’) trans realities. But, the memoir resides at the intersection between anecdote and instruction. The stories relating to Bertie binding his chest (the process of compressing and concealing breasts), for example, go on to offer direct advice, including a list of reputable retailers, and a visual guide for making a binder from a one-piece swimming costume.

While the memoir predominantly addresses its advice to trans teenagers, sometimes leaving the non-trans reader feeling somewhat of an eavesdropper, a couple of the later chapters are also more explicitly geared towards educating a broader readership. The book’s twenty-second chapter, ‘A Message from My Mum,’ speaks directly to the parents of gender variant children, foregrounding the role of family within a transgender person’s life and transition. Here, Michelle Bertie talks about Alex’s relationship with his gender in early childhood and her own feelings towards his transition, before offering advice to other parents. What’s more, Chapter Twenty-Three, ‘Accepting Trans People,’ recommends ten ways to show acceptance and respect to trans people, whether they be family, loved ones, colleagues or complete strangers. These guidelines include:

using their preferred name, avoiding asking invasive questions and never assuming their gender.

Although, at times, the almost didactic digressions of Bertie's writing have the potential to detract from the fluidity of its structure, using the memoir as a platform from which to tackle challenging and complex issues surrounding what he terms 'transliness' is a commendable contribution to the growing field of trans literature for young adults. His personality resonates throughout the memoir, and *Trans Mission* forms a valuable introduction to trans issues. Perhaps most importantly though, Bertie's memoir is a fantastic guidebook. It has the capacity to be used as a valuable support mechanism for trans adolescents and their families and to aid a growing number of teens along their own journeys of self-discovery.

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