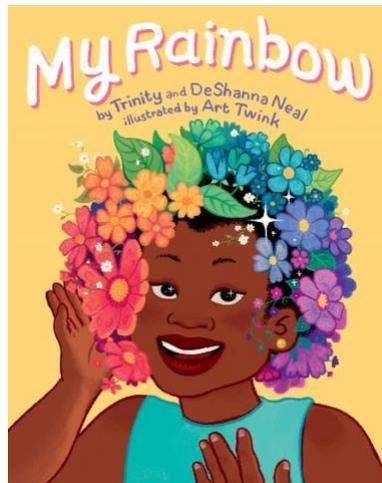


## First Opinion: Adding Beauty and Dimension to Our World

Neal, Trinity and DeShanna. *My Rainbow*. Illustrated by Art Twink. New York:

Kokila, 2020. Print.

*Elizabeth Frisbie*



Like the meteorological phenomenon featured in its title, the book *My Rainbow* adds beauty and dimension to our world through both its powerful text and richly colorful illustrations. Written by the daughter and mother team of Trinity and DeShanna Neal based on their personal life experiences, *My Rainbow* shares the story of Trinity, a Black transgender girl who has autism, as she searches to express true self.

According to an interview with the Neal family, Trinity socially transitioned at age four, being aware at a young age her true gender was female (Fishman). *My Rainbow* seems to pick up her story shortly after that as the main character still enjoys playing with dolls, but has the advanced imagination, social awareness and language skills more often seen in older children.

As the story opens, we find Trinity and her sibling playing with their dolls. Trinity is upset because, although her doll shares her “beautiful dark skin” (5), the doll’s hair is long and soft, while her own is short. Trinity believes that “I can’t be a girl” (5) because “it’s different for transgender girls. I *need* long hair” (11). She shares these thoughts with her mother, who listens very carefully and with acceptance. Since Trinity hated how itchy she felt during past attempts to grow her hair out, her mother ponders how she can help “to make things right” (13). When the wigs at the shop fail to suffice, Trinity’s brother Lucien triumphantly suggests “Trinity needs her very own rainbow” (17-18). Agreeing, her dedicated mother spends the night weaving a wig of long teal, pink and purple curls. As the story closes, we see a joyful Trinity with sparkling eyes, proudly dancing while wearing her rainbow hair. As she exclaims, “It’s me, Mom. My hair has finally come! It’s *my* rainbow!” it is clear to the reader that Trinity is now her true self, a unique girl who is as beautiful as a rainbow both inside and out.

While the text deftly and sensitively conveys the experiences and concerns of transgender children and their families, the illustrations are equally, if not at times more powerful in conveying the emotion and concepts featured in *My Rainbow*. The colors are warm and many of the illustrations feature flowers or heart-shaped leaves, each of these symbolizing love to the unconscious mind. Family members are depicted as holding one another and listening thoughtfully, reflecting attunement and care. The idea that “differences” are acceptable, normal parts of life abound: various types of body shapes are represented, Mom has facial piercings, Mom and Lucien both wear glasses, and the store clerk Maya’s name tag indicates they/them as their preferred pronoun (similar to an earlier text reference to Trinity’s sibling Hyperion using their on page 3). The white stars on pages showing Trinity initially trying on her rainbow hair somehow seem to actually sparkle, although there is no glitter on the page. This suggests there is magic in the moment Trinity’s outward appearance matches her true internal self.

Beyond the illustrations, *My Rainbow* is a beautiful book from a psychological perspective, in that it offers so many positive, and potentially healing, aspects to young readers and their families. Research indicates the vast importance of representation to all humans, but especially for children whose self-concepts, esteem, and identities are still evolving. When children see positively depicted characters with whom they can identify, this supports healthy development. Here, children who are transgender, Black and/or on the autism spectrum, who are often marginalized, stereotyped and misunderstood in the real world, find themselves represented

in a very positive light. *My Rainbow* presents them the opportunity to point to the page and say “She is like me” with pride. Additionally, many children will treasure the fact that it is Trinity’s brother Lucien who comes up with the solution to the problem after Mom is clearly stumped. *My Rainbow* depicts children as unique individuals who are capable solution-finders, creative expressors, and valuable people who are aware of their own needs and emotions. This sentiment will ring true for most young readers, even if they come from families in which the adults fail to recognize their capabilities. For those who as yet lack confidence in themselves or who are not honored by the adults in their lives, *My Rainbow* may be therapeutic, bringing them hope that things can be better someday.

In addition to the positive depiction of the child characters, this book’s description of Trinity’s family is also powerfully strengths-based. Breaking down stereotypes of the Black family as an unemployed single mother with many children living on welfare, the rich illustrations and story line in *My Rainbow* depict a two-parent household with at least one employed adult in which imagination, reading, classical music, and learning are central elements of family life. There is real resiliency in this family. When a problem arises, it is shared among members, collaboratively solved, and determined action is taken. No wig that will do? Make one! Don’t know how? Use the internet to educate yourself so you are able to. The relationships between family members in *My Rainbow* are connected and healthy, reflecting unconditional love at its best. Each member is accepted for who they are and when children speak, adults listen to understand with open minds and hearts. Parents are clearly attuned to their children, moving to comfort them when upsets occur and encouraging them in their joyful moments. When Trinity’s mother says “I’m listening” (p. 10), she clearly is, verified by both the questions and conversation in the text and the illustrations, which show Mom on the floor calmly embracing Trinity as she processes her feelings. Through her observation of Trinity’s behavior, her mother realizes something is bothering her daughter and asks about it. Using open-ended questions, Mom guides Trinity toward clearly expressing her thoughts and feelings, eventually clarifying what she needs. In these ways, *My Rainbow* is a wonderful addition to multicultural children’s literature, depicting a Black family that is close-knit, deeply loving and clearly attuned to and supportive of one another’s needs and true selves.

While the supportive story arc, beautifully rich illustrations, and representation of the value of each family member as an individual are strengths of the book, *My Rainbow* presents a

few challenges. First, some readers may be unfamiliar with the terminology “cisgender” and “transgender.” Including a guide in the back of the book with definitions and pertinent factual information to reduce misunderstandings might be beneficial. Likewise, inclusion of a discussion guide explaining how to talk with children of various ages about this topic might alleviate concerns adults may have about sharing the book. Second, for families of children with more severe types of autism spectrum disorder, Trinity’s self-awareness, verbal capabilities, and social interactions may not fit their own experiences. Those sharing the book should consider this before presenting *My Rainbow* to a child with autism or their family. That said, one reviewer who self-identifies as an adult with autism clearly enjoyed the book, stating, “Love the artwork and the message.... I’m glad to see books like this exist” (Cornelius).

A limited amount of children’s literature is available centering on transgender themes. Readers are thus lucky to have *My Rainbow* available to them. Through powerful text and engaging illustrations this book presents a family at its best: connected, loving, and valuing each member as a unique individual. Trinity’s self-awareness and willingness to pursue her truth in order to become her unique self will cause readers to share in her joy as she dances wearing her rainbow hair. *My Rainbow* is a beautiful celebration of our transgender youth, their journey, and those who lovingly support them.

### **Works Cited**

Cornelius, Jody. Review comment. *Good Reads*: January 10, 2022.

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### **About the Author**

**Elizabeth Frisbie** is an early childhood mental health consultant, play therapist and public speaker specializing in supporting young children with challenging behaviors and strong

emotions, their families and educators. Her dream is that all children will be cherished, understood, respected and fully welcome in all the places in which they find themselves.