

## First Opinion: The Complications of Being Charlotte: Alex Gino's *Melissa*

Alex Gino. *Melissa*. New York City, NY: Scholastic Press, 2022. Print.

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MELISSA 

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS **GEORGE**  
ALEX GINO

There are few things fourth-grade Melissa wants more than to play the loquacious Charlotte in her grade's production of the E. B. White classic *Charlotte's Web*. She has fallen for the spider but, even more, sees playing Charlotte on stage as an opportunity to be seen as who she truly feels she is, for Melissa is known as George to her classmates, presenting as male, though desiring, more than anything, to be recognized as the girl she knows she is. Published in 2015, the book - originally titled *George* - was one of the first middle grade novels to wrestle with transgender children's experiences and has had a lengthy tenure (2016 - 2020) on the American Library Association's list of the top ten challenged books in the United States, including three years as the most contested title. In 2021, the original title of the book, *George*, was changed to

*Melissa*, a way of Gino making amends to Melissa for naming the book “with a name the main character does not like or want to use for herself” (Flood).

There is much that is deliciously subversive in this novel, from the way Melissa is referred to as George throughout a good portion of the book, but always by the pronoun her. Of the criteria upon which this book is often challenged, confusion is often listed. For a cisgendered reader, whose physical body has always matched the way they conceive of their gender in their head, this may seem like a disconnect, as though the grammatical rules of pronouns and gender takes precedence over the responsibility to recognize others’ humanity wholesale and on their terms. This rhetorical move focuses the reader’s attention on the tension Melissa embodies: her body presents as a boy but she is very much a girl. Her discomfort with her body is made clear to the reader in scenes taking place in bathrooms, both at her home as well as at her school. Gently rendered, these moments fail to be as explicit as some critics have imagined them to be - “She immersed herself in the warm water and tried not to think about what was between her legs, but there it was, bobbing in front of her” (45). There is nary a scrotum in sight, a la Susan Patron’s 2007 Newberry Award-winning novel *The Higher Power of Lucky*. (When do children and youth gain the right to access and use anatomical language? How does this gatekeeping restrict children’s bodily autonomy?)

As Melissa evolves, those who care for her must revise how they think about her, portraying a wide range of responses. Her best friend Kelly, despite her unwavering support, does not understand the ramifications of what is being asked of her at first but, after seeing Melissa in distress, recognizes her as a girl, not just wanting to be a girl. Melissa’s mother’s reckoning is much more fraught; upon discovering a collection of *Cosmopolitan*-esque magazines hidden away in Melissa’s closet during a cleaning binge, she assumes Melissa is gay,

a move that allows her to preserve Melissa's male identity. It is only after seeing Melissa as Charlotte, a crafty - and loving - move masterminded by Kelly, that she begins to grapple with the reality of what Melissa is asking of her loved ones and her own need for support to rise to the occasion of loving Melissa. It is Scott, Melissa's older brother, used throughout most of the book for comedic effect, who seems most prepared to see Melissa as she wants to be seen: "Scott snuck glances her way too, but where Mom's eyes were filled with concern and confusion, Scott looked at George as if his sibling made sense to him for the first time" (142).

There is an incident backstage during rehearsals for *Charlotte's Web* that land Melissa in the principal's office. In the corner of Principal Maldonado's office, Melissa spies a poster of a rainbow flag and another asking to support safe spaces for GLBT youth. "Reading the word *transgender* [emphasis in the original] 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. Maybe they could talk about makeup together. Maybe they could even try some on" (125). For certain readers, this book can feel like that safe space Melissa so longs for, a safe space desperately needed in an overwhelming and neverending assault on the very personhood of transgender children and youth. As I write this, on Election Day, November 2022, there are 155 bills nationwide targeting transgender people, the majority of these bills focusing on transgender children and youth (Branigin & Kirkpatrick), children like Melissa who are working to figure out who they are and both how to be recognized as well as valued by those around them. The book hints at the wealth of information available to children and youth and Melissa via the Internet - there's a single line about information Melissa has sought out on the Internet after Scott showed her how to delete a browser's history, a miniscule plot point that did not go unnoticed by proponents of restricting access to *Melissa*. So much of the resistance to this book is about adult

control over children's bodies and the trans child, in particular, "is always already seen as incomplete... its gender is not fully mature, and the child is not fully capable of knowing its own gender" (Castañeda 59). *Melissa* offers no easy answers, but by the close of the book, Melissa has started the process of making herself known to others, on her own terms.

### **About the Author**

**Nicholas E. Husbye** (he/him/his) is a literacy educator and researcher at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln, where he works diligently to ensure his pre-service teachers are well-equipped to connect their young readers with books that reflect them, their interests, and the work they engage the world in.

### **Works Cited**

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