

Reviews

The Art of Being Normal

Lisa Williamson
David Fickling Books, 2015, £7.69 (hb), 357pp.
ISBN: 9781910200322

Recently there has been a wealth of creative work featuring transgender people on stage, page and screen. Add to that stories of transition from public figures and the rise in transgender people modelling for well-known fashion houses, and it becomes clear that important discussions about transgender issues are finding their place in the public consciousness.

Lisa Williamson's excellent debut novel *The Art of Being Normal* skilfully blends the difficulties of being a teenager with the social challenges of identifying as transgender. In the opening pages we meet David, a 14-year-old with a secret. He tells us that when he was 8 his teacher asked the class to write what they wanted to be when they grew up. David wrote 'I want to be a girl'. Six years later he is desperately trying to find the courage to tell his parents, while conducting anxious inspections of his body for the changes of puberty. School starts for another year, bringing with it Leo, the new kid. Leo acts as the second narrator. Leo has his own secret which has led to him moving school and which, it seems, everyone at school is prepared to speculate on.

Having both David and Leo narrate the story works well as the characters are in contrast with one another and the friendship that forms between them manages to be simultaneously unlikely and utterly believable. Leo is certainly the stronger, more richly developed character with a wry sense of humour and plenty of wit. At times I felt David's interactions, especially with his best friends, were a little stereotypical and lacking in depth. That said, there is plenty to like about all the characters and I laughed aloud on more than one occasion.

David makes reference early on to the fact that his life refuses to conform to the plot line of a 'perky teenage movie'. Williamson plays with this familiar trope cleverly and manages to avoid delivering a saccharine ending while still rewarding the reader. Williamson wants us to realise that there is no art to being 'normal' because there is no such thing. This warm and funny novel adds to the growing body of work that tells us all that this is okay.

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Suicide: A Modern Obsession

Derek Beattie and Patrick Devitt
Liberties Press, 2015, £12.99 (pb), 224 pp.
ISBN: 9781909718296

If the poor have been with us always, then so too has suicide. I read Al Alvarez's *The Savage God* as a preclinical student trying to make sense of the sudden and unexplained death of my beloved uncle. His death, so many years ago, still rends my family in two: those who sympathise with and those who accuse his widow. Alvarez, who was himself trying to untangle the suicide of his friend the poet Sylvia Plath and the emotions generated by it, provided some valuable insights but precious little comfort. In many cultures it had always been so, it seemed, with all associated with such an act – whether dead or surviving, aware or unaware of the victim's intentions – being held blameworthy for commission of sin or omission of care by some in the victim's family, community, religion or state.

The search for answers to the murky and emotionally laden questions surrounding suicide is widespread. This book – written by a psychiatrist and a journalist – attempts to answer many of the frequently asked questions and poses some others to 'tease out fact from fiction, pragmatism from hysteria and common sense from nonsense' (p.16). The book is biased towards general-interest readers and arose from the authors' concerns at the proliferation of suicide prevention programmes in a country (Ireland) with a relatively low suicide rate – the modern obsession referred to in the title. The structure and style have elements of investigative journalism rather than either patient support manual or academic treatise, with headings such as 'Why?' (p.38) and 'Irresponsible and responsible media reporting of suicide' (p.130). The content is composed chiefly of a fairly conventional but selective review of the topic of suicide, sprinkled with case studies and extracts from interviews with experts conducted by one of the authors.

Had this book, rather than Alvarez's, been available to me, would it have provided the answers and comfort I sought? Sadly, no, it would have left me frustrated by its rather self-defensive tone and by statements of what might be obvious to a seasoned mental health professional but not to a general-interest reader nor a grieving relative. All those well-known risk factors (with such feeble positive predictive value) and 'Safety-planning interventions' (p.186) militate against accepting that 'Not all suicides are preventable and there are no foolproof measures . . .' (p.214). And no amount of understanding could expiate the guilt.

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