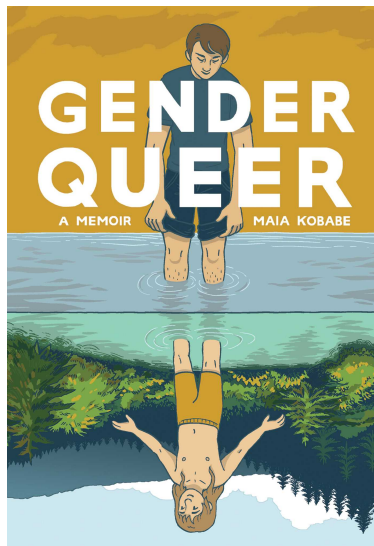


First Opinion: Gender Queer: A Memoir Offers Conversation About Queerness

Maia Kobabe. *Gender Queer: A Memoir*. Portland, ORE: Oni Press, 2019. Print.

Marie Lewis



For many of us who grew up without the vocabulary to describe our sexuality, gender, or that feeling of not quite fitting into the binary, the graphic memoir *Gender Queer* might feel intimately relatable.

For author and cartoonist Maia Kobabe, the book helped define and illustrate the questions she had about coming out as queer and nonbinary, and the challenges of getting her point across to family and friends. Kobabe presents many of these questions and feelings as thought bubbles she was unable to speak aloud at the time.

Written in 2019 when eight out of the American Library Association's top ten most challenged books covered LGBTQ+ perspectives and subject matter, and topping the list in 2021,

Gender Queer was reissued in May of this year and it is both a fiercely contested, yet desperately needed perspective for young people and parents still struggling with their understanding of gender identity.

We know more than ever about the science behind gender identity and the many factors that contribute to how the brain is masculinized or feminized during development, yet we live in a society that, while coming around to the idea of homosexuality and bisexuality, still largely insists on the binary when it comes to gender.

Maia describes growing up in a rural environment in a family that did not strictly enforce gender roles, eir confusion whenever those rules were enforced elsewhere, and eir frustration about all the things e was apparently supposed to know about, but didn't, such as not being permitted to swim with eir chest uncovered like boys did.

Maia describes not wanting to be a boy or a girl, not wanting to be romantically involved, and not knowing whether e was transgender. In high school, Maia says e believed eir soul was both male and female.

The difference, Maia says, between eir emotional relationships and the traits e was attracted to made categorizing eir sexuality difficult. Maia says, "The knowledge of a third option slept like a seed under the soil. This seed put out so many leaves. But I didn't have the language to identify the plant."

Citing Patricia S. Churchland's research in *Touching A Nerve: The Self As Brain*, Maia says e learned that "a huge part of who I am is due to the suite of hormones and neurochemicals present in the womb as my cells developed." Maia expresses tremendous relief in the realization e was "born this way."

This book has been challenged for its sexually explicit images. But on my first read, the fleeting descriptions of sexual acts are not as remarkable as Maia's struggle to understand and explain emself to eir family and friends, and those thoughts e wasn't able to put to words.

Maia poured eir frustration and confusion into creating comics and fanfiction. E recalls that eir parents completely accepted and understood em when e came out as bisexual, but that Maia struggled to explain eir gender while e was still sorting out what it all meant.

"I think the fact that I don't see myself as, or understand myself as, a female person but that most of the people I interact with do...is actually damaging all of my relationships, even ones with family and friends," Maia says.

Maia recalls learning about the "Spivak" pronouns, e, em, and eir, first used by American mathematician Michael Spivak, and how Maia was instantly enamored by them.

"I'd love to use these pronouns but I don't want people to feel uncomfortable." Maia says to a friend. Eir friend responds, "So instead of asking people to do something to make you feel more comfortable, you'd rather just feel a little uncomfortable all the time? You'd rather internalize and carry that discomfort every time someone who loves you misgenders you?"

"Well, when you put it that way..." Maia answers.

Maia goes on to describe the discomfort e felt when people would refer to em with feminine pronouns.

"Getting called 'she' feels like discovering a rock stuck in my shoe. Or getting scratched by a tag at the back of my shirt," e says.

But often, Maia would freeze and not be able to speak up when e was misgendered. E describes the hurt e felt when eir parents would slip. E recalls eir mother asking in a moment of frustration, "Why are you doing this to us?"

Alternatively, Maia describes the elation e felt the first time e saw emself referred to as “e” in a work email.

“I experienced a startling wave of joy,” e says.

E describes another “small but meaningful victory” as e began to discover the attire and accessories that felt “queer and magical.”

Maia says e continues to struggle with whether or not to introduce eir gender identity when teaching single-day workshops to students, fearing eir identity is “too political” for the classroom.

Yet Maia also wonders how many of those students might be trans or nonbinary, but don’t have words for it yet.

Maia wonders, “How many of them have never seen a nonbinary adult?”

“Is my silence actually a disservice to them?”

This line, I believe, underlines the profound necessity of this book. It offers a language and vocabulary to young people who might not find it elsewhere. For parents, it demonstrates how vital it is to give children the space to explore their gender in the way that feels the most authentic to them, and how trying to enforce the gender assigned at birth doesn’t change our neurochemistry. *Gender Queer* provides a meaningful guide for navigating that path.

Works Cited

American Library Association. “Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists.” *Advocacy, Legislation & Issues*, American Library Association, 20 Sept. 2022, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>.

About the Author

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