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## Book Review: Be Who You Are

Written to Open Minds and Hearts to the Concept of Children who do Not Identify with Their Birth Gender

Reviewed by Katherine Cummings

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### Be Who You Are

by Jennifer Carr  
Published by Authorhouse 2010  
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1452087252

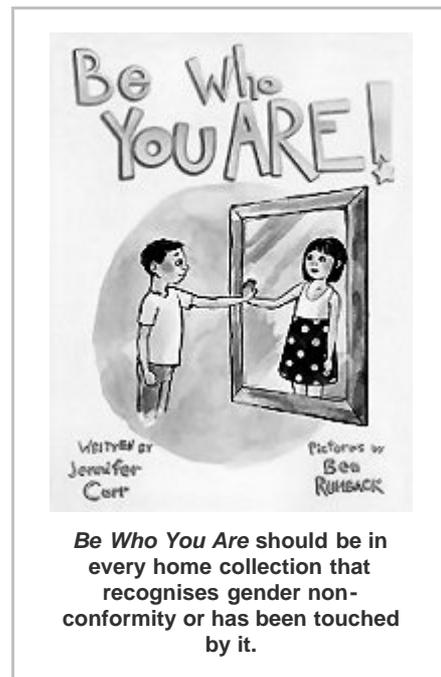
**... it should certainly be in every public library Children's Collection and in every primary school library in the country.**

I have been talking for over twenty years to college and university classes, conferences, working parties, and anyone else who will stand still long enough, on various topics concerning the good ship *Transgender* and all who sail in her.

Two of my constant themes have been the need to make better provision for the very young and for the aged in our community. Leaving aside the aged for the moment, let us look at the needs of the very young.

The key to reform is education and I believe that we need to put in place information programs, both formal and informal, to teach people about transgender. These programs should start in pre-school or kindergarten and continue up through every level of education to post-graduate. At the pre-school and kindergarten level it is vital that parents (and teachers) be educated as well. Educating a child who then carries information home only to find it contradicted by parental prejudice and misunderstanding will accomplish little.

One of the points I have made time and time again has been that we need a simple, well-written and persuasive book suitable for the pre-school child and the beginning reader, sympathetically illustrated and readily available. I made the parallel with *Heather Has Two*



*Mommies; All Families Are Different; Do I Have A Daddy?; One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* to demonstrate that books are already available for children with same-sex parents, with inter-racial parents, with single parents and so on.

The need I have always wanted someone to satisfy was the one for a book about transgender children, written realistically but with both compassion and passion. For me, that book is *Be Who You Are*.

Written and published by Jennifer Carr in 2010, and illustrated by Ben Rumbach, the book tells the story of Nick who, "as far back as [he] could remember" had seen himself as a girl. Nick tells his parents he is a girl and they tell him to "Be who you are."

His teachers and peer group at school are not as accepting. A teacher scolds Nick for drawing himself as a girl. Teachers object to Nick lining up with the girls and he is not allowed to use the girls' washroom.

At home, however, his parents and his young brother exhibit familial love to an enviable degree. He is taken to a doctor who has had experience of children like Nick. Nick is allowed to wear the dresses he loves, and to go on family outings wearing them.

When Nick makes his decision that he wants to live full-time as a girl, his parents "listened, gave him a big hug and said they would help".

Nick asks if he is the only person to feel as he does, and his parents seek a self-help group made up of families like theirs, and Nick finds new friends who understand.

Care is taken, too, to ensure that Nick's brother, Will, is not left out of the great adventure, and is helped to understand the way "brothers and sisters love and support one another".

Nick changes her name to Hope and goes through the stage of being accidentally (and sometimes on purpose) called by the wrong name or gender pronoun but her family remain supportive and her brother protects her when he can.

The story ends on a high note, "Hope's story never ends. Each day brings new joys and new challenges. Each day brings the chance for all of us to be who we are, to accept others for who they are and to make the world a more loving place for everyone."

Jennifer Carr has written a remarkably moving and idealised version of Nick's transition to Hope. It is exactly the way things should be and so seldom are, but there will never be significant and widespread improvement until we are prepared, like Nick's parents in the book, and Jennifer Carr in real life, to recognise what needs to be done, and have the courage, conviction and compassion to be part of a movement for reform.

Carr has a daughter who knew from the age of four that she was in the wrong body (as, indeed, did most of us who have been through the transgender mill). Jennifer supported her child and always encouraged her to "be who you are", and her daughter transitioned shortly before her sixth birthday. She found very little support from the [L.G.B.T.](#) self-help groups, who did not include sub-teen children in their communities, so she turned to [P.F.L.A.G.](#), who encouraged her to create a play group for gender non-conforming children.

Carr carried on her fight for recognition of the needs of trans children until the local public school system agreed to recognise the rights of gender non-conforming children of elementary school age. She understands that this will be an ongoing mission to "advocate for these children and their families to create a more just and loving world".

The book is made more accessible and interesting for children by the charming and sensitive illustrations by Ben Rumback (they made a difference for me, too). Ben is an [L.G.B.T.](#) ally, a child educator and a gifted artist and illustrator. His depiction of Nick's transformation into Hope is flawless and I hope we see his illustrations in any future titles in the series Carr intends to write. [You can find more about Ben and his work by visiting his artblog.](#) 

To quote from the 'Illustrator Biography' included in *Be Who You Are*, "... Ben's style [is] a mix of creative collaboration and courageous exploration. His images imply movement and sincerity so that [they are] a perfect complement to the text".

There are other books that deal with gender non-conforming children but the only ones I have seen dwell more on the outer signs of non-conformity ... the urge to dress up rather than to live completely in the other gender role. Nick goes through his 'Halloween Princess' phase, but goes so far beyond this stage that one can only believe the change is real and forever, and is not so much a change as an affirmation of truth. There is more mileage in t-shirts, shorts and sneakers than there will ever be in tinsel and sequins.

*Be Who You Are* should be in every home collection that recognises gender non-conformity or has been touched by it, and it should certainly be in every public library Children's Collection and in every primary school library in the country.

I look forward with great interest to the next work (or collaboration) by Carr and Rumback.

One gap I see in the available literature (unless I have overlooked something) is for a sub-teen children's book on Intersex.

## Jennifer Carr

From Jennifer Carr Books website: Jennifer Carr is a writer, blogger, public speaker and advocate for transgender and all gender diverse individuals. She shares her journey of self-awareness inspired by parenting her gender diverse child on her internationally celebrated blog "Today You Are You" She uses a pseudonym to protect the safety of her family.

Jennifer is the proud mother of a child who knew she was born in the wrong body at four years old. "Be who you are," Jennifer told her daughter as school, clothes, family and pronouns became increasingly difficult. Each day was another opportunity to live authentically, but there were abundant learning curves and life lessons around every corner. Jennifer's daughter socially transitioned to living as herself, a girl, shortly before her sixth birthday.

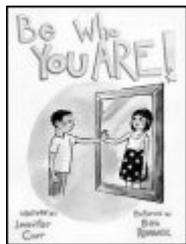
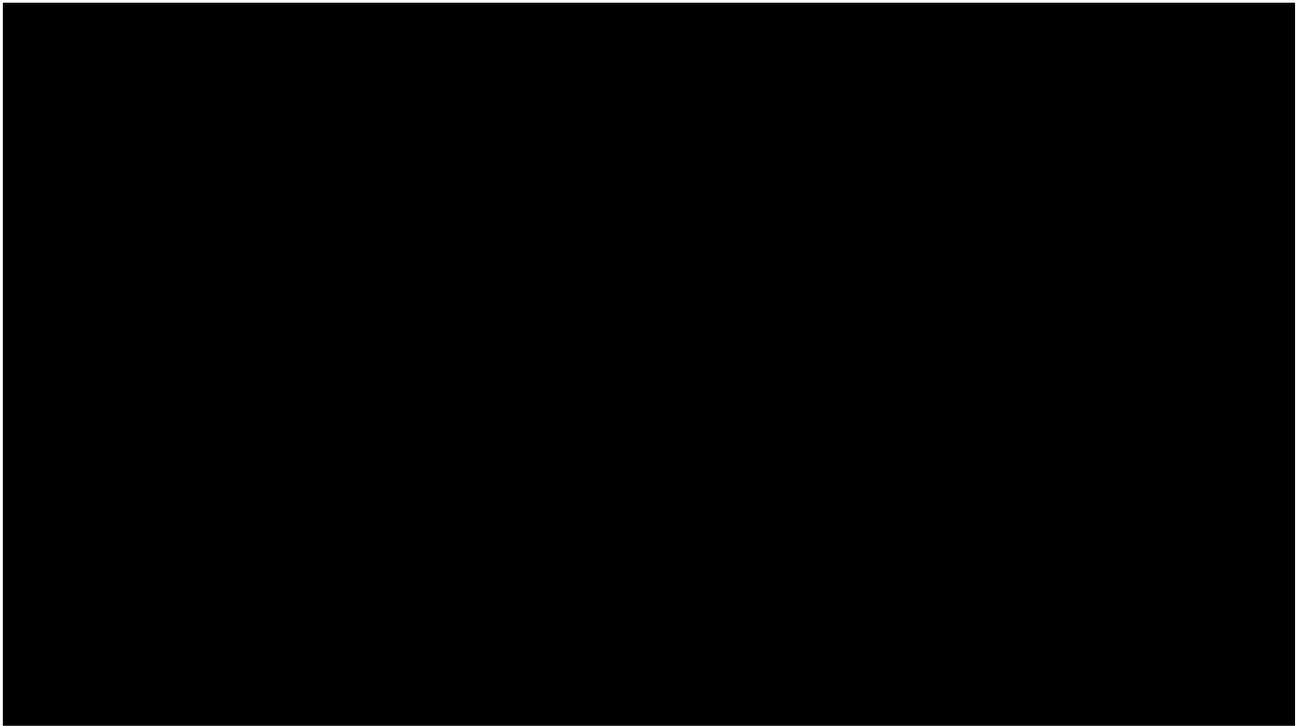
Despite living in one of the largest cities in the United States, Jennifer could not find resources for gender-diverse children locally. After being turned away from several organizations that serve the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (L.G.B.T.) population due to the fact they exclusively served teens and adults, Jennifer reached out to Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P.F.L.A.G.) and doors began to open. She joined P.F.L.A.G. and found the inspiration to create a play group for gender diverse elementary school-age children. The group provides a way for the children, their siblings and their parents to have a support group of their own. The children and families understand that they are not alone. This is usually a powerful revelation.

Jennifer continued to reach out to national organizations for resources and support. By collaborating with Trans Youth Family Allies and the American Civil Liberties Union, Jennifer fought the local public school system for the rights and privacy of gender-diverse children. They won, and together they created the first protocol for admitting and supporting gender-diverse and transgender elementary school children. Their success means that children are better protected and understood at school allowing a better learning environment for all. Families no longer have to make their children conform to gender stereotypes to attend school. All children will be addressed by their preferred name and pronoun. Every child is allowed to use the bathroom appropriate for their expressed gender. Families will not have to worry about the failing grades, emotional problems and physical abuse traditionally experienced by gender-diverse children. Jennifer understood that this victory would be the beginning of a life-long mission to advocate for these children and their families to create a more just and loving world.

When she isn't writing books or blogging, Jennifer educates organizations, individuals, families and schools about the unique challenges gender-diverse and transgender children and their parents live with every day: working with siblings, bullying, handling issues at school, transitioning, using appropriate bathrooms, creating name changes, using correct pronouns, talking with family members and friends who don't understand and meeting all life's challenges and successes with honesty, honour and humanity.

*Be Who You Are* is the first in a series of children's books designed to open hearts and minds about transgender and gender-diverse children. Jennifer wrote *Be Who You Are* for her two children who longed to have a book that reflects the love and acceptance that resembles their own family.





**Be Who You Are**  
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**From Google Books:**  Nick was born in a boy's body but has always felt like a girl inside. Nick's family supports him when he says he no longer wants to be called a boy or dress like a boy; "Always remember to be who you are Nick. Remember that we love you, and we are so proud of you". Nick's parents find a group for families like theirs. With their support, Nick expresses a desire to be addressed as "she", and then to be named "Hope". Based on the author's experiences with

her own children.

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