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Illustrating *Be Who You Are*

The Largest Illustration Job Ben Rumback has Undertaken to Date

by Ben Rumback

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... I was thinking a lot about these children who have no media written or crafted just for them.

My artistic career (maybe artistic endeavour would be more accurate) began when I was five years old and won a 'Draw Mom' contest at a department store in a small town in Kansas, U.S.A. where I did the majority of my growing up. That was the first time I understood that an artist could be paid for doing what they love. My reward was a gift certificate, which I promptly traded in for a Batman Nintendo game. This is a very telling introduction. A good portion of the money I make from my art still goes on video games and comic books.

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The *Be Who You Are* project is, to date, the largest illustration job I have undertaken. I have created murals, which are technically bigger, but the book took a lot more thought, planning and post-production. The children's literary world is a well-known hard nut to crack, and I know personally that getting your book or portfolio into the right hands can often seem impossible.

Jen and I ended up meeting after a happenstance series of events put her in conversation with a close friend of mine, and the subject just happened to be about her hunt for an illustrator. A few emails later, we met for coffee, and I did my best to seem seasoned and professional.

Hearing Jen's real-life story, and reading the final version of the manuscript (relived through the characters of Hope, Will and Dr. Bee) affected me deeply, as I imagine it strikes anyone of a certain political disposition, and an inclination toward empathy. It's a harrowing proposition, calling for a great deal of bravery and faith in your family and friends, to act in support of a child questioning what is arguably the most defining characteristic of self.

I was immediately taken with the project, and excited at the prospect of my first published work being of such an avant garde, helpful and important subject matter.

The first hurdle to overcome was the weight of gender on our identity. As the youngest of three boys, I had very little insight into even the slightest variety of gender. Because we were raised in a small town in Kansas, sexuality came in one flavour, when it came at all and gender identity was a given. I was exposed to the ever growing presence of the L.G.B.T. community through movies and books, but in such a hetero, traditional environment, these ideas were almost never presented to me on an even keel, but in very choppy, often hostile or satirical waters.

It wasn't until late high school that the concept of being an ally was a thing in my world. College, I guess, would be the first place I ever really saw things straight (no pun intended) and understood sexuality as a spectrum instead of a two toned thing consisting of two boxes, check one, pink or blue.

These days I am happy to count among my nearest and dearest, a broad array of lifestyles and love styles, and I think gratefully of the ways they have allowed me to broaden my understanding of the world and the wonderful variety of people in it.

Along came this book, then, presenting an idea that I hadn't devoted any thought to, even in my self-congratulating 'new mind'. Transgender and gender identity were clear concepts to me, but the idea of carrying such a burden before adulthood, before teenage, heck, before third grade, had never crossed my mind. After meeting Jen and having read a few times through the copy she left me, I was thinking a lot about these children, who have no media written or crafted just for them.

There weren't any helpful books on the subject, and that, as much as any desire for work or to get my name out there, got me involved in, and devoted to, the project. When I am not working as an illustrator, I teach preschool and give art lessons to kids the same age as Hope, the main character in the book. This gave me an advantage when it came time to get inside the characters, the parents and the kids, and convey visually the characters' varying moments of despair, loneliness, family, triumph.

Character design starts in a very raw place. We are refined, not defined, by our clothes, haircuts, and all of the other oh-so-important parts of our surface identity. The process of developing Hope began with the face. I had to get it to a place that didn't instinctively read girl or boy. And while the look of the book would be stylised, I didn't want to go too far into the cartoon zone. I started with a series of nine heads and shoulders, youthful and bald, in varying degrees of rotation. Next, I took some root emotions from the working copy of the text, and marked each head with one of four labels: neutral, happy, sad or worried. Looking at it now, after working so much feeling into the faces in the finished book, it seems like a pretty short list.

When I had finished the chart for Hope, I did a smaller set for each of the characters that surround her in the story. For her mother, dad and little brother, I took an idyllic approach - they were beautiful, healthy parents and a loving brother, who would go forward in this very idyllic story, to help and protect Hope, a person who doesn't quite fit into her surroundings.

Layout and planning of the book went fairly smoothly. The brunt of my efforts were spent on trying to not show the same set of people facing the audience in a limited variety of poses. This is something non-artist-types may never think of, specifically in kids' books and comic books. We are given a limited supply of characters and settings, and have to mix up the staging to keep it interesting. If we neglect this, you end up with ten or twenty very similar pictures with the facial features changing ever so slightly. It doesn't do much for me.

Another thing I worked at was keeping the movement of the characters at the same pace as the writing. These characters were going places, be it to the park, library or the office of the great Dr. Bee (the character I most enjoyed drawing, because of her hair and fashion sense). There are three major postures for the characters in this book, particularly Hope. Shoulders forward, shoulders back, or prone. The only time we find Hope lying down is on page three of the book, where she, (still identified as Nick), is being lovingly carried off to bed by her parents. When Hope is feeling oppressed or less confident, her shoulders slump forward in a defensive, defeated pose, matching the down-turned eyes and frown of the mouth. In the twenty-four illustrations featuring Hope, she is shown in this pose only three times.

These things happen consciously and subconsciously, and I often don't realise I am doing them until they become a trend within the body of work. After the realisation hits, I keep them going, and sometimes go back through and give them a little more resonance.

When I flip through my copy of *Be Who You Are*, I feel a great wash of pride, with some overtones of disbelief. The process wasn't without its bumps and, at times, the project seemed altogether too large and daunting. But, it turned out a series of paintings that Jen thought matched her words beautifully, and I have no doubt that it has already helped many people get a better understanding of what they, their son or daughter, nephew, granddaughter or sibling is feeling.

Anyone dealing with that sort of struggle needs a hand, especially the very young. Jen and other advocates hold their hands out to them. I am happy knowing that her hands, at least, have a few smears of my paint on them.

Ben Rumback

From Jennifer Carr Books (broken link removed): Ben Rumback is an artist, illustrator, L.G.B.T. ally and child educator. His attention to detail in the creation of his artwork and his talent for bringing text to life led to his illustration of *Be Who You Are* written by Jennifer Carr. Ben incorporates small details that feel brand new yet timeless classic.

Clever in his approach to illustration, Ben creates an entire world around his characters so that he knows exactly what they had for breakfast, what they read the night before and what they'll be doing later that day. This insight lends a 365 degree view that comes through in each illustration. The familiarity in the art warms the reader to the character like a host introducing two friends at a party.

Ben grew up in a small town in Kansas, U.S.A. locally famous for its salt mines and state fairground. After studying painting and drawing at Kansas University, he started teaching at a Montessori school. Shortly after, Ben was named artist in residence. In 2007, Ben moved to Chicago with his wife Martha. When he isn't making art he assumes his other role as Mr. Ben, a beloved preschool teacher. [Enjoy more of Ben's creations at his website](#) .



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

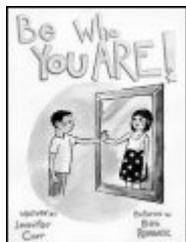
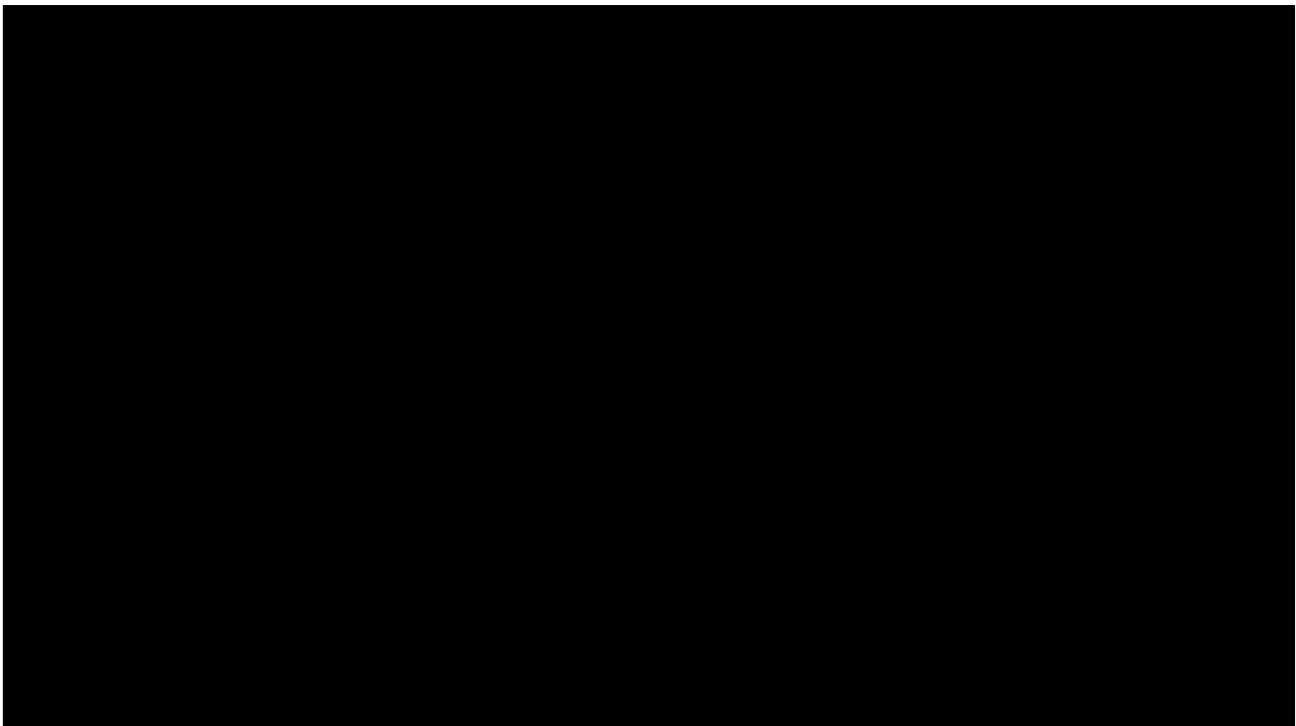


have a support group of their own. The children and families understand that they are not alone. This is usually a powerful revelation.

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
Author: Jennifer Carr
Publisher: AuthorHouse (2010)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1452087252

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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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South

Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.