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Opening extract from

Being a Girl

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CONTENTS

1. Being a Girl 5
2. A Quick Herstory Lesson ...21
3. Hellcats and Hormones ... 37
4. Bloody Periods 69
5. Face, Fashion and First Impressions 91
6. The Hair Necessities 113
7. Matters of the Heart 149
8. Sex: on a Need to Know Basis..... 185
9. Being a Woman..... 211
10. Helpful Stuff..... 221
11. Index 222

This book is for you.
That's right, YOU.









Chapter 1

BEING A GIRL



Being a girl is brilliant

And being a teenage girl is especially brilliant.

For one thing, you're not yet a fully-fledged adult, and this is **good**. It means that no one can reasonably expect you to behave like Sensible Brenda for hours and hours on end. But at the same time, you're not a little kid any more either. And this is **good** too. Because no one can reasonably expect you to wear that turquoise poncho that was lovingly hand-knitted for you by your gran.

And when you're a teenage girl, you have plenty of time to do the things that you really **want** to be doing. Like sleeping and chatting and listening to loud music and sleeping and shopping and wearing cool clothes and sleeping and chatting and laughing so hard that it gives you a stitch, and sleeping and dreaming and being a bit random.

And when you're a teenage girl, you don't have to bother your head with the boring stuff. Like having a full-time job and paying bills.

All in all, it's a unique and special situation that you're in.

Happy days!



So why waste your precious teenage time reading this book?

Shouldn't you just be living the teenage dream?

The answer is yes and no. Live the dream, definitely. But spare a couple of hours to read this book too. There's a good chance you might get something useful out of it. Because even though **your age alone** makes you one of planet Earth's **bright young things**, being a teenage girl *isn't* a nonstop bundle of LOLs.

Sometimes it's actually quite bonkers and baffling and **seriously damn weird**.

And now and again, it's just a rotten old bellyache. Which you probably already know.

On those bellyache days, you might catch yourself wishing you'd been born a boy. But if you think that boys have got it easy, just take a moment to consider these three things:

1. **The smell of your bedroom**. I bet it smells nice. Am I right? Now think of your brother's bedroom.[1] Enough said.

2. **Male bodies are weird**. I'm not being rude. I'm being factual. There's no point denying it – the penis is a pretty damn peculiar piece of apparatus. It has its uses, of course. In fact, it can do some marvellous things. But, be honest, would you **really** want a penis of your own?

   Nope. Me neither.

[1] No brother? No problem. Just find a spare room in your house and bung in some wet grass, a couple of hamsters, several scoops of mashed potato and a pair of muddy football boots. Then take a long hard sniff. If you *did* have a brother, there's a good chance that this is what his room would smell like – more or less.

3. **Some boys get so obsessed with the penis that they go through a phase where they can't physically stop themselves from randomly drawing them on school chairs.** And desks. And walls. And their bus passes. If you were a boy, it could be you clutching hold of that sweaty marker pen and frantically decorating your world with willies . . .



Still wish you were a boy?

If the answer is yes, **please don't panic** – you're not the first and you certainly won't be the last. These things happen. It's because **gender** is something that is thrust upon us whether we like it or not. A bit like a dodgy birthday present. Or that hand-knitted poncho. I'll talk more about gender a little later on.

If the answer is **not** yes but

HELL NO

…then **welcome back to the sisterhood**, my friend. Being a girl is something worth celebrating. It means you're

young

and

EXCITING

and

packed with possibilities.

And, OK, there are those dodgy bellyache moments. And other sorts of dodginess too – but here's the thing:

You don't need to go through any of the shit **bits on your own.**

Because if there's **one thing** that all of us girls tend to be fairly good at, **it's talking about how we feel**. And that's really handy. Because it means that some girl somewhere – whether it's your best friend or your sympathetic sister or your trustworthy aunt or just some random woman who's written a letter to a magazine – will know **exactly** how you feel and be happy to share the experience with you. This will make that dodgy moment seem less shit and more normal. But just in case you still think that **NOBODY** understands and you're in this totally on your own – you're not! You've got **me** and I'm talking to you via this book!

But who the heck am I?

I write stuff for teenagers, and my mission here is to steer you through all of life's harsher moments and tell you **everything I know** about being a girl. And I know a thing or two because:

1. I've been one.
2. I'm currently a woman.[2] Which is the same as being a girl, really – just older.
3. As well as being a writer, I was an English teacher for years – and this means I've chatted with teenage girls about every subject under the sun. That's the beauty of books for you! They're full of all sorts of delicious details that lead to all sorts of fascinating discussions. Shakespeare's plays are the best. Because his favourite topics are pretty much these:

SEX, DEATH & SKULDUGGERY



[2] I'm not expecting this situation to change.

By the way, do you know how old Juliet was when she snuck off in secret to marry her Romeo? Thirteen.

Thirteen!

So if you ever hear anyone whinging on about how the young people of today are getting worse, quietly ignore them. They are wrong. Please feel free to use Romeo and Juliet as evidence.

4. I've talked to a fair few boys as well. This means I have **inside information**. I can tell you a bit about **what boys think**. And guess what? I've scrubbed ink-pen willies off chairs. Hairy testicles too.

Also, I promise not to talk to you as if your face is filled with Farley's rusks – I'll tell it to you straight.

But before we go any further, I'm going to let you in on a personal secret. I was rubbish at being a teenage girl.

RUBBISH.

Or I thought I was. And if I could travel back in time and tell the thirteen-year-old me that one day I'd be trusted with the important task of writing this book, I'd laugh really hard in my own middle-aged face and say:

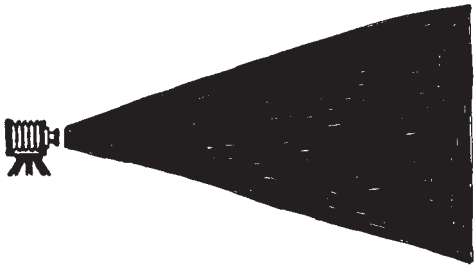


And this sad fact was perfectly true. Which is why I thought I was rubbish at being a teenage girl.

Rubbish *Smubbish*.

The truth

What you are about to read next is probably the most important sentence I have ever written.



There is no right way to be a girl or rubbish way to be a girl.

Just make sure you're being a fairly decent human being and you'll be just fine.

OK, let's get going.

So it's easy, then? There's no possible way to get this **girl** thing wrong?

Hmm. Not exactly.

When you reach a certain age, being a girl is actually really **complicated**. You've probably already discovered this for yourself.

It starts getting complicated the second that we're plopped out into the world. Maybe even before that. Maybe it actually begins the moment the doctor or nurse or midwife points at a fuzzy blob on a computer

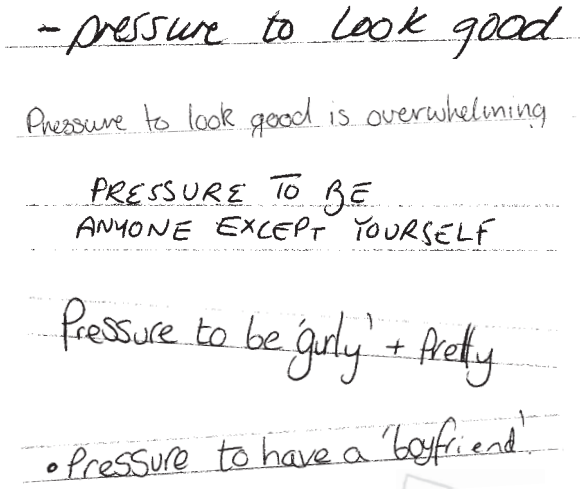
screen – the blob is **you**, by the way – and says, 'Oooh, it's going to be a little girl.' [3]

Because that's when **The Pressure** starts.

I need to pause here to introduce my **Student Focus Group**. This is a group of roughly sixty sixth-formers – boys and girls – who helpfully chatted to me about their experiences of growing up. The girls in the group also wrote down answers to the following three questions:

1. **What are the three best things about being a girl?**
2. **What are the three worst things about being a girl?**
3. **What advice would you give to your thirteen-year-old self?**

Here are some of the responses to question 2.



[3] If you're reading this and you happen to be a boy or a man, it's unlikely that anyone ever said this. But let me take this opportunity to CONGRATULATE YOU right now on being cool enough and curious enough to read a book called *Being a Girl*. Thank you, sir. I salute you.

Notice a pattern? Yep, it's the P-word.[4] It cropped up again and again and again.



So where the heck is all this **pressure** coming from?

Well, this is where we come to something really important . . .

[4] By the way, there was another P-word mentioned. Give yourself a tampon if you can guess what it was.

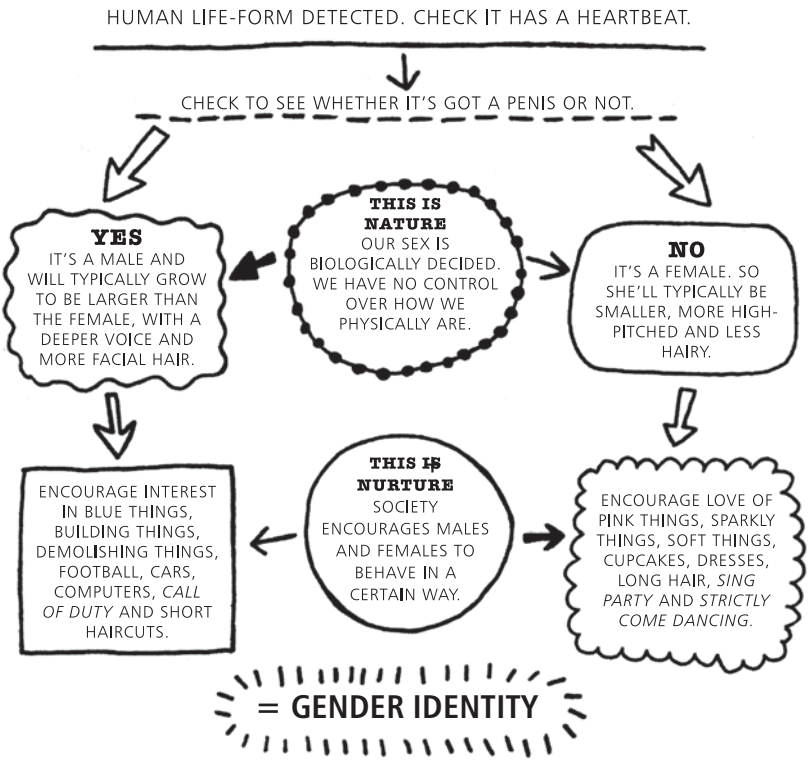
Gender and identity

People belong to lots of groups. They sometimes join little ones like an art club or a sports team or the Scout Association. And other groups just claim them as members anyway. These are the big ones. Like the working or middle classes. And being British or French or American. And maybe being Black or Asian or Jewish or Irish as well. All these groups can be called communities or societies. And the biggest one has so many members that it doesn't need any extra labelling or explanation. It just gets called society.

Society has a view on **everything**. It certainly has a view on what a girl is. So the moment our sex is discovered, society starts bombarding us with messages about how we should look and behave. These messages are sent to us through the telly, via magazines and books and films, and also by our family and friends. The reason **why** we get these messages is very complicated – but it's mostly a souvenir from the olden days when boys needed to fight woolly mammoths and wildebeests, and girls needed to stay in the cave and look after babies.



In very basic terms, it works something like this:



This system of **nature + nurture = gender identity** works as comfortably as clockwork for some people but it also creates a lot of pressure for others. In fact, most of us will feel like we're under some sort of pressure at some stage in our lives – because **we aren't always that fussed** about the things we're told we **ought** to like. And maybe we don't **look** how we think we

should, either. This experience of feeling a bit pressurised and a bit different is very common. So if pink, sparkly things aren't your bag, don't sweat it. Cheerfully pull on your camouflage combat pants instead. You aren't alone.

BEING TRANSGENDER

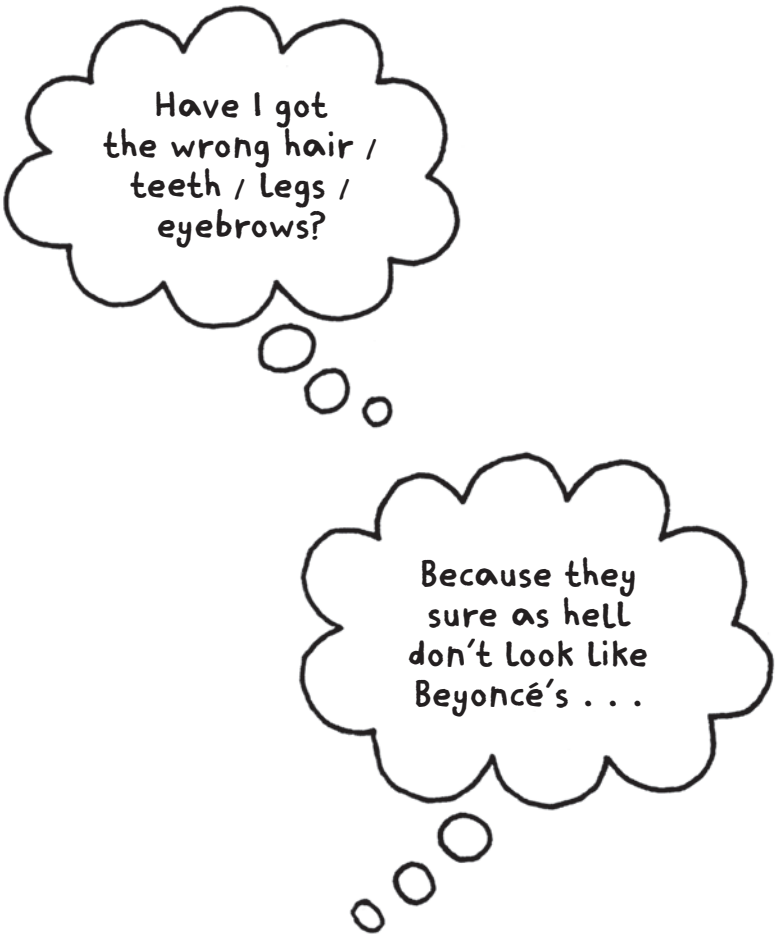
Very occasionally, the pressure is a heck of a lot more serious. Imagine waking up every day and thinking, **'Ohmygoodgod! I totally feel like I'm trapped in the wrong body!'** Why does this happen? Nobody really knows. But don't forget that gender is something largely shaped by society, and it doesn't offer us many options. We're all neatly labelled as being **either** a bird **or** a bloke. But we don't get to choose those labels and we don't get to choose our bodies either. It's the dodgy poncho scenario all over again – we're saddled with them whether we want them or not. So what if you've got all the physical bits of a bloke but feel like a bird? Or maybe it's the other way around? What if you have a **very strong sense** that you've been born with the wrong body?

This is how some people feel all the time. It's called being **transgender**. Many people who find themselves in this position are so convinced that there's been a mix-up that they're prepared to put themselves through surgery to sort the situation out. That's a huge decision and it must take an enormous amount of courage to see it through.

If you're reading this right now and recognise these feelings, please don't struggle with this all on your own. **TALK TO SOMEONE YOU TRUST**. Or if that's too daunting, get in touch with the helpful people at **Mermaidsuk.org.uk**. They are an organisation that supports young people with gender identity issues.

You can find a phone number for them at the back of this book.

But for the vast majority of us, the pressure is much closer to something like this:



And before we know it, we're **judging** ourselves – and perhaps we're judging other people too. Like this:



Are you any good at being a girl?

Tick the box if you . . .

- ☐ love the colour pink
- ☐ look sassy in spaghetti straps
- ☐ can walk effortlessly in very high heels
- ☐ have long and lustrous[5] hair
- ☐ can apply eyeliner with one hand
- ☐ feel like the cat with the cream on Valentine's Day

But – as always – judging how **good** you are at being a girl is not this simple. Having said that, if you scored six out of six, that's great! Straighten up your spaghetti straps, flick back your lustrous hair and keep on doing your thing **just the way you are**. There's **definitely nothing wrong** with being the type of girl that society would love us all to be. It's just useful to remember this:

OTHER MODELS ARE AVAILABLE.

[5] I've read this word a billion times on shampoo bottles. I've just looked it up. It means splendid, brilliant and shiny.



Girls and boys **aren't** made out of gingerbread and we haven't all been cut into shape with a cookie cutter. **It doesn't matter** if we don't look like the people in the films and on the adverts and it doesn't matter if we don't really identify with them either. The truth is that **we're all different**. And some boys like pink and some girls like collecting football stickers and some people have wonky noses and some thirteen-year-old girls wear vests. **Right** and **wrong** doesn't even come into it.[6]

So if you didn't score six, or if you didn't score any – that's great too! Because there are a thousand ways of being a girl. Your own unique way is one of them.



[6] Just so long as we try to be a halfway decent human being. No one likes a douchebag.