First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Wren & Rook
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ISBN: 978 1 5263 6282 7
E-book ISBN: 978 1 5263 6283 4
Audio book ISBN: 978 1 5263 6292 6
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Wren & Rook
An imprint of Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment, London EC4Y 0DZ
An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk
www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

Printed in the United Kingdom

Publishing Director: Debbie Foy
Managing Editor: Liza Wilde
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WHAT'S THE T?

JUNO DAWSON

ILLUSTRATED BY SOOFIYA

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NOTE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS:

Hello! If you're the parent or carer to a young transgender or non-binary person, please turn to chapter sixteen on page 266 where you'll find special advice just for you!

NOTE FOR ALL READERS:

In this book I've used 'LGBTQ+', 'Queer' and 'Trans' as shorthand for the entire spectrum of sexual and gender identities. It's not the intention for anyone to feel excluded by those terms. Essentially, I mean ***anyone*** who isn't straight and/or cisgender.[1]

[1] For a definition, turn to p. 24

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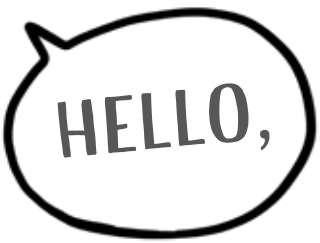
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PART ONE

ALL ABOUT IDENTITY

BECOMING ME



it's nice to meet you. My name is Juno Dawson, I'm an author from Brighton, UK, and I am a woman. Only one of those things was true to begin with.

When I was born a ridiculously long time ago, I was actually from *Bradford*, and I wasn't an *author* because I was a tiny baby. Also, my parents called me *James*.



It's true, I was. It just took me some time to figure it out.

You see, the doctor who oversaw my birth made a whoopsie. It really wasn't his fault. As far as he could tell from a quick scan of my body,

I was a baby boy. What he couldn't have known all those years ago is that, for a tiny fraction of people globally, their eventual gender identity does ***not*** match their biological sex.

It's like a bag of chocolatey Revels: you can't always tell what's in the middle from looking at the outer shell.

It's super-rare, but it does keep happening. It is a thing. We call it (at this moment in time) being **TRANSGENDER** or sometimes just **TRANS**. These days, it makes up the T in LGBTQ+.

L IS FOR LESBIAN
G IS FOR GAY
B IS FOR BISEXUAL
T IS FOR TRANSGENDER
Q IS FOR QUEER

It took me almost thirty years to piece together the clues that I might be one of these mythological unicorn people I'd dimly heard about.



You see, the 1990s, when I was a teenager, were a different time. For one thing, we didn't have the Internet.

In some ways, without trolling, sexting and Russian bots, the world was a nicer, simpler place, but it was also a less well-informed place.

When I was an infant, my parents had no access to information about trans children. As a child I asked many, many times when I was going to 'turn into a girl'. I was told to stop being silly. When we played games out on the suburban cul-de-sac where I lived, I was ***always*** a girl character. I was Sheila from *Dungeons & Dragons* or Teela from *He-Man*. I had a Barbie doll that I used to make-believe was Penelope Pitstop by constructing elaborate traps with string and toilet roll tubes. My parents were concerned about this 'strange' behaviour (even though it was actually perfectly natural for me) because they had no notion that this happens all the time, all over the world.

By the time I was ten or eleven years old, thoroughly shamed into silence and secrecy by pretty much every adult and peer in my world, I certainly wasn't telling anyone I wanted to be a girl. I was worried I'd get my head kicked in. But I did used to dream of the teenage girl I

might magically turn into. I would lay in my cramped single bed each night and make a deal with God. ***If I'm good, tomorrow can I be a girl?*** And I could picture exactly the woman I'd grow into – I'd look like April O'Neill from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or Peri from *Doctor Who*. Sadly, my wishes didn't come true. At least, ***not yet***.

Later, as a queer[2] teenager, I didn't have access to the litany of amazing role models you'll read about in the Transgender Hall of Fame segments that separate each chapter of this book. I didn't have Laverne Cox or Janet Mock to aspire to. By 2005, the only trans person I'd ever really seen in the media was Nadia Almada, the winner of *Big Brother UK* series five. Even then, although I thought Nadia was great, I didn't connect her experience with mine because, in the Big Brother house, she didn't discuss her transition or childhood.

Now: you might know of me from the companion book to this one, **THIS BOOK IS GAY**, which I wrote in 2012 when I was still known as James Dawson. While I was researching that title, I was very keen for it to be fully inclusive of all queer people. With this in mind, I set out to interview as many people as possible so the book wouldn't just be based on my experiences. I met lesbians, bi people, gay men from all walks of life, and yes, trans people.

It was during those research interviews that I started to meet people whose experiences were hauntingly like mine: they too had made deals with God in the night; they too had a very different vision of the adult they might grow into.

[2] I use queer as shorthand for all LGBTQIA people because it marks us all out together as something 'other than' straight or cisgender. I love that we, despite our occasional differences, march together as comrades. Also our queer identities may change over time so 'queer' captures me at any stage in my gorgey queer life.

It hadn't even occurred to my clueless little brain that my whole life had been a **BIG FAT TRANSGENDER LIFE**. Right from day one. I lived on the streets as one person and another, wholly different, person in my head! How mad is that? It was like having a girl twin who lived in another dimension. If I was in a women's clothes shop, I'd think 'This is what she'd buy'. If I saw a cute haircut in a magazine, I'd think 'She'd get that hair-do'. If I met a straight man, I'd think to myself 'She'd ask him out for coffee'. I was living two lives. God, exhausting. Ain't no one got time for that.

As you can imagine, the life I was living in the flesh wasn't as much fun as the one I was having in my head. Everything I was doing as James was a bit half-arsed. I really wanted to be someone else; I wanted to be ***her***.

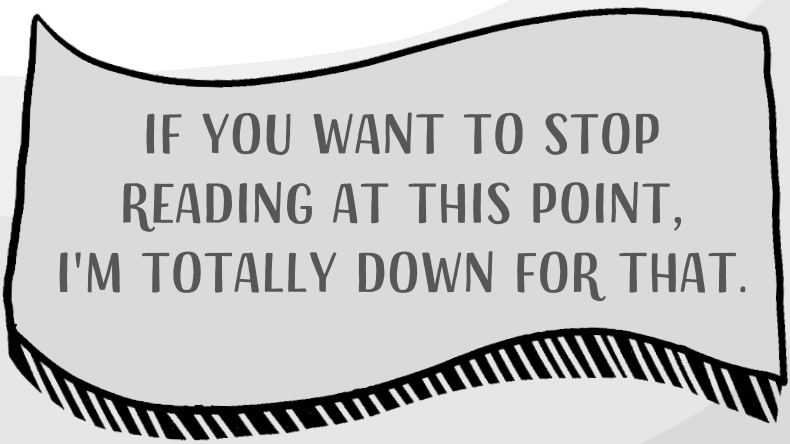
And so, one night in bed, I thought to myself 'Maybe this is what being trans is and 'Would that be so bad?' I'd already been through the coming-out mill once as a teenager and both me and my family had survived the ordeal. While 'living as a gay man' I'd been verbally abused, followed, even spat at in the street. Being trans couldn't be any worse. Or so I thought.

I was a grown-up so I did a very grown-up thing and hired a therapist to talk through the many, many questions I had swimming around in my head. It was a confusing time. In lots of ways it would have been ***easier*** to carry on being James and not rock the boat. I could have, but I had a huge fear that I was wasting my life. I keenly felt time slipping away. What's more, I met lots of other trans women who were living their best possible lives. I've spoken to some of them while writing this book. To be frank, I was jealous. ***They get to be girls, why can't I?***

This book is called *What's The T?* This is a phrase that originated on New York City's ball circuit in the 1980s (the one you might have seen in *Paris Is Burning* or *Pose*) and it means 'what's the truth?' I suppose that's what I finally learned in 2013: the truth about myself. Up until that point I thought I ***wanted*** to be a girl when, in fact, I just ***was*** one. For all those years, I believed an error a doctor once told my parents.

Perhaps I should have actually asked my new trans friends how ***hard*** it was going to be, but regardless, I made the step and **CAME OUT!** Again! Everyone was like 'woah, twist!', and I was like 'yes, bitch, psych!' I actually didn't say that, but people were super-supportive. My friends have been **AMAZING**, my readers and fans completely embraced me; and my father even agreed to film a documentary about it (although that's a different story).

So yes, for the last six years I've been Juno and – honestly – happier than I have ever been in my entire life.



That's because so often in the news we see stories about transphobia, phony debates about trans lives, and brutal acts of violence committed against us.

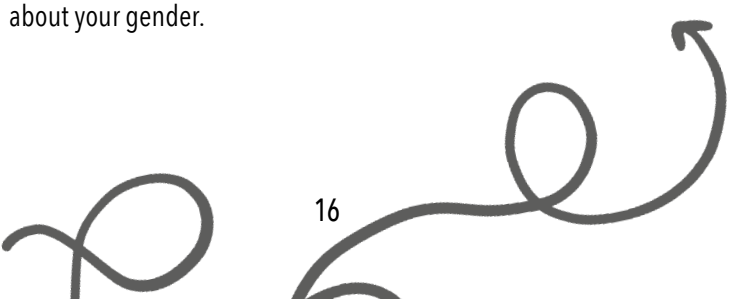
You'd think, looking at the papers, that being trans is the **WORST CASE SCENARIO**. If all you take from this book is that it's the **BEST THING I EVER DID**, I'm delighted, and I've done my job.

That said, I'm not here to sell you a

'TRANSGENDER PACKAGE'.

It *really* doesn't work like that! God, if only, life would be much simpler. I don't know why *you're* reading this book.

- Maybe it was on a nice Pride display in a bookstore.
- Maybe it's in your school library and it has a nice cover.
- Maybe it's because trans issues are very *trendy* according to some papers.
- Maybe it's because you have a trans friend or family member and want to support them as much as you can. If that's you ... thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your friend or relative will need all the help they can get.
- Or maybe it's because you have some questions about your gender.





YOUR BASKET: (0)

FAQS

RETURNS POLICY

- WORLDWIDE SHIPPING
- EXPRESS DELIVERY AVAILABLE
- GIFT WRAP OPTIONS

Let's look at that last one. I think it's very normal for young adults to ask **BIG QUESTIONS**. All your life, someone (usually a parent or carer) has *told* you who you are and what you like. Now, all of a sudden, you have to answer big questions independently: what are your politics? What are your beliefs? What are your tastes in music, film or food?

It seems really natural to me to assume that everyone will ask big questions of their identity too. It is the most fundamental thing about us – how we define ourselves at our core.

HOW DO WE PERCEIVE OURSELVES?

Oooh, it's a biggy. Adolescence is a particularly turbulent time for humans because we are already a melange of hormones regardless of whether we're cis or trans. First love, first kiss, first pube: *Everything* feels heightened. I should know, I went through puberty twice and, let me tell you, the second time – aged thirty-two – was no more fun than the first.

We all have a relationship with the notion of gender because we were **ALL** labelled at birth. Even if you are intersex[3], the doctor told your parents you were male or female and, from that moment on, a massive cartoon anvil of gender expectations landed on your head.

[3] This will be more fully defined later, fear not.