

How beautiful the ordinary : twelve stories of identity

How Beautiful the Ordinary, edited by Michael Cart



How Beautiful the Ordinary, edited by Michael Cart, is a welcome addition to the small but growing collection of young adult fiction exploring gender identity and sexual orientation. Being a young person is difficult, what with all the changes physical, emotional, and social. Most of us spend our whole lives getting to know ourselves, and those initial explorations in our youth are some of the most confusing and painful (and exhilarating and profound) because they are so new. All of this can be overwhelming, and when you throw in societal condemnation of some of these identities and/or lifestyles it is especially hard. This collection of short fiction by well-respected young adult authors takes a loving and unrelenting look at the struggle not only to discover what we are as young women and men, but to accept and own that identity as well. "My Virtual World" by Francesca Lia Block chronicles the ways in which online connections can serve to safely hide or reveal one's true self. Through a series of increasingly open instant messages, two young people struggling with depression find acceptance and in turn learn to accept themselves. Ariel Schrag and Eric Shanower contribute a humorous look at gay pride events and the pangs of a secret high school love, respectively, in graphic novel format. Poetic verse (Julie Anne Peters' intimate "The First Time") and screenplay (Ron Koertge's experimental story of a gay son's coming out to his father) also add variety to the collection. One of the most powerful stories, however, uses the old folktale "The Highwayman" to explore how dangerous trying to suppress things like love and desire can be, regardless of sexual orientation - Margo Lanagan's "A Dark Red Love Knot" is a bloody and grim tale of tragedy, and a flat-out devastating piece of writing. Finally, Gregory Macguire, author of the Wicked series, offers proof that knowing what we are is a process that never ends in "The Silk Road Runs Through Tupperneck, N. H.," a melancholy revisit of first love after twenty years' absence.

For more short fiction dealing with teen identity and sexual orientation, try Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence, edited by Marion Dane Bauer and featuring writers such as Bruce Coville, M. E. Kerr, and Jane Yolen. Ariel Schrag has published several "high school comic chronicles" in graphic format - try Awkward and Definition. Transgender and transitions of all kinds are explored in Julie Anne Peters' Luna, and identity is literally taken and rebuilt in Nicola Griffith's science fiction tale Slow River. For real-life accounts of young people's search for their sexual identities, try I'm Looking Through You: Growing Up Haunted, Jennifer Finney Boylan's memoir of growing up as a girl in a boy's body in a haunted house. Resources, first-hand accounts, and practical information and advice can be found in Kelly Huegel's GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens. All of these and many more similar titles are excellent choices not only for those questioning their sexual identity, but for anyone (and that's really everyone) who has tried to truly understand themselves.

Posted by Chris H. on February 28, 2012

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