



Monthly Featured Book

Presented by ADL's Education Department

About the Monthly Featured Book: This collection of featured books is from Books Matter™: The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice. The books teach about bias and prejudice, promote respect for diversity, encourage social action and reinforce themes addressed in education programs of [A World of Difference® Institute](#), ADL's international anti-bias education and diversity training provider. For educators, adult family members and other caregivers of children, reading the books listed on this site with your children and incorporating them into instruction are excellent ways to talk about these important concepts at home and in the classroom.

Melissa

Alex Gino (Author)

When people look at Melissa, they think they see a boy named George. But she knows she's not a boy. She knows she's a girl. Melissa thinks she'll have to keep this a secret forever. Then her teacher announces that their class play is going to be Charlotte's Web. Melissa really, really, REALLY wants to play Charlotte. But the teacher says she can't even try out for the part... because she's a boy. With the help of her best friend, Kelly, Melissa comes up with a plan. Not just so she can be Charlotte -- but so everyone can know who she is, once and for all.

ISBN: 978-1338843415

Publisher: Scholastic Press

Year Published: 2022

Age Range: 8–12

Book Themes

Transgender Identity, Gender Roles, Being an Ally, Bullying

Key Words

Discuss and define these words with students prior to reading the book and remind them of the meanings as they come up in the book. See ADL's [Education Glossary Terms](#).

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| ■ accommodations | ■ parched | ■ sense | ■ suffocating | ■ melancholy |
| ■ compassion | ■ devious | ■ solemn | ■ transitioning | ■ unoccupied |
| ■ confiscate | ■ encased | ■ expectations | ■ transgender | ■ wise |
| ■ monologue | ■ escorted | ■ gender roles | ■ illumination | |
| ■ needy | ■ private | ■ gossiping | ■ inspiration | |

Discussion Questions

If the students read the book in small groups or as a whole class, ask discussion questions throughout their reading in order to check comprehension and engage them on a deeper level. Some of these questions can also be used as writing prompts. When students have finished the book, choose from these questions to guide a group discussion:

- What is the book about?
- How would you describe Melissa's personality and how does she change throughout the book?
- Why do you think Melissa hid the fashion magazines from her Mom? What happened when Melissa's Mom found her magazines?
- In what ways did Melissa's classmates, especially Rick and Jeff, tease and bully her?
- Why do you think it upset Melissa when her teacher said, "I know you'll turn into a fine young man?"
- Why do you think it was so important to Melissa to try out for the part of Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web*?
- How did Melissa feel when she was rehearsing the part of Charlotte with her friend Kelly?
- Why was Melissa so hesitant to tell her Mom that she is a girl?
- What was Melissa and Kelly's friendship like?
- Have you ever had a friend you wanted to tell an important secret to but didn't know how?
- What did Melissa already know about being transgender and transitioning? How did she learn about it?
- What happened when Melissa auditioned for the role of Charlotte? How did Melissa feel when Ms. Udell told her she couldn't play the part of Charlotte?
- How did Melissa feel when she found out that Kelly got the part of Charlotte?
- What was the conversation like between Melissa and Kelly when Melissa told Kelly that she is a girl? How did Kelly respond?
- What did Melissa mean when she said "Sometimes transgender people don't get rights."? What do you know about the rights of transgender people?
- Why do you think Melissa painted the words SOME JERK on paper and then dropped the paper on Jeff's back so the words ended up on his shirt? What happened after that?
- What happened when Melissa told her Mom that she is a girl?
- What did Melissa mean when she thought to herself, "Nothing—certainly not a buffet dinner—could help the fact that Mom didn't see her."?
- Why did Melissa want her Mom to see her playing Charlotte in the play?
- What was Melissa and Kelly's secret plan for the play and why did they do that?
- How did Scott, Melissa's brother, respond when she told him that she is a girl?

- How do you think Melissa felt as she was playing the part of Charlotte? How do you know?
- When Principal Maldonado said to Melissa's Mom, "You can't control who your children are, but you can certainly support them," what do you think she meant by that?
- What was Kelly's idea for helping Melissa to be Melissa in the world?
- How did Melissa feel when they went to the zoo and she was able to be Melissa? How do you know?
- How do you think it felt to Melissa that everyone thought she was a boy but she knows she's a girl?
- How did you feel when the book ended?
- What is the overall theme and message of the book?

Extension Activities

Below are activities that you can do with children in order to extend the learning from the book.

1. Discuss Transgender Identity

Talk with students about what it means to be transgender. Be sensitive and thoughtful about whether you have students (or parents) in your class who may be gender non-conforming or transgender. Ask students: *What does the word transgender mean?* Remind students about how Melissa described the word in the book. Elicit from students and define **transgender** as a term for people whose gender identity differs from how they were assigned at birth (e.g., assigned boy or girl). Ask if students know any famous people or movie/TV characters who are transgender such as Caitlyn Jenner, Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, Jazz Jennings, Elliott Page, characters on television shows such as CeCe Drake on *Pretty Little Liars*, Coach Beiste and Unique Adams on *Glee* and Cole on *The Fosters*. Ask students what they think some of the challenges are for people who are transgender and explain that even though transgender people have been more visible lately, they still face bias and discrimination in many aspects of their lives including higher rates of bullying, discrimination, ridicule and violence. Talk about the rules/policies some schools have put into place to make schools safer and more inclusive for transgender students such as gender neutral bathrooms, accurate use of names and pronouns, access to sports and physical education, dress codes and bullying and harassment policies. Talk together about what you can do as a class or school to support students who are transgender or gender non-conforming.

2. Reading Response Writing Activities

Write the Next Chapter of the Book: Have students discuss what might happen next in the book and write an additional chapter. Remind students how the book ends and ask the following questions: *What do you think happens when Melissa comes home from the zoo with Kelly? Do you think she tells her Mom about the experience? What happens in school after the students and parents see Melissa playing Charlotte?* Have students write the next chapter of the book, either beginning with when Melissa gets home from the zoo or back at school the next day.

Diary Entry of Character: Have students select a character from the book, which could include: Melissa, Kelly, Melissa's Mom, Scott, Rick or Ms. Maldonado. Then have them write diary entries for the chosen character, writing 5–8 diary entries that the character might have kept before, during or after the book's events. Remind students that the character's thoughts and feelings are very important in a diary as well as their reaction to the day-to-day events and other activities that take place throughout the book. You may choose to have students engage in pre-writing discussions with a partner about their character in order to get some of their ideas out. After they have completed the assignment, have them share their diary entries with the class and consider creating an online collection of all the diary entries.

Book Review or Book Talk: Have students write a book review of *Melissa*. The elements of a book review should include: (1) title, author, genre and theme; (2) personal reflections about the book—how it made you feel, what you learned and your thoughts about it; (3) plot summary—describe what happened without giving away spoilers; (4) people/characters you loved or disliked and (5) why it is worth reading or not. Consider sharing the reviews on a class blog, using [GoodReads](#) for online reviews. In addition, they can do a “book talk” with the class in which they discuss the elements of their book review based on the categories above or read it aloud and answer questions.

3. Being an Ally

Ask students: *What does it mean to be an ally?* Elicit/explain the definition of **ally** as someone who helps or stands up for someone who is being bullied or the target of prejudice. Ask students: *What are some examples of ally behavior you have seen in school? What are examples of ally behavior in the book?* Then, brainstorm characters in the book who displayed ally behavior. These could include Melissa’s best friend Kelly, Melissa’s brother Scott, Principal Maldonado, etc. Distribute a copy of the handout **Be An Ally** to all students or project it on the board/smart board. Read the handout aloud and have students reflect on the strategies in the handout along with the examples of ally behavior they shared from the book. Have students go through the book and jot down as many instances of ally behavior that they can (quotes, actions, etc.) and encourage them to consider examples that include all of the six ways. As a culmination, have students illustrate their examples of ally behavior by creating a final project which could be an essay, poster, video, PowerPoint, etc. that highlights the ally behavior in the book.

ADL Resources

The following are curriculum and resources on transgender identity, gender norms and bullying.

Curriculum Resources

“Identity-Based Bullying,” Current Events Classroom, www.adl.org/education-outreach/lesson-plans/c/identity-based-bullying.html

“Transgender Identity and Issues,” Current Events Classroom, www.adl.org/education-outreach/lesson-plans/c/transgender-identity-and-issues.html

“Understanding Homophobia/Heterosexism and How to Be An Ally,” Current Events Classroom, www.adl.org/education-outreach/lesson-plans/c/understanding-homophobia-heterosexism-ally.html

“Unheard Voices: Stories of LGBT History,” Curriculum Connections, www.adl.org/education-outreach/lesson-plans/c/unheard-voices-stories-of-lgbt-history.html

Websites

Anti-Bias Education

www.adl.org/education-outreach/anti-bias-education

Provides training program offerings for pre-K through 12th grade school communities—educators, administrators, youth and families—which focus on the development of an inclusive culture and respectful school climate by addressing issues of bias and bullying.

Be An Ally: Six Simple Ways

www.adl.org/education-outreach/anti-bias-education

Some simple things a student can do to be an ally to targets of name-calling and bullying.

Bullying and Cyberbullying Prevention Strategies and Resources

www.adl.org/education-outreach/anti-bias-education

Provides a collection of ADL resources on bullying and cyberbullying for educators, administrators, students and families and caregivers.

Beyond the Binary: Discussing Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Identity in K-12 Schools

www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/beyond-binary-discussing-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming

This site includes suggestions and resources for K-12 teachers on how to bias, prejudice and bullying related to transgender and gender non-conforming issues and identity.

Terminology Related to Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Identity

www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/terminology-related-to-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-identity.pdf

Definitions for terms related to transgender and gender non-conforming issues and identity.

Let's Get it Right: Using Correct Pronouns and Names

<https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/lets-get-it-right-using-correct-pronouns-and-names>

Children's Books

Below are links to lists of recommended anti-bias and multicultural books for the indicated category.

LGBTQ People and Homophobia/Heterosexism, www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?f%5B0%5D=topic%3A1614

LGBTQ People and Homophobia/Heterosexism: Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Identity, www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?f%5B0%5D=topic%3A1615

Gender and Sexism: Gender Norms, www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?f%5B0%5D=topic%3A1599