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Epic Reads

BOOK CLUB

SYMPTOMS OF BEING HUMAN

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The first thing you're going to want to know about me is: Am I a boy, or am I a girl?

Riley Cavanaugh is many things: Punk rock. Snarky. Rebellious. And gender fluid. Some days Riley identifies as a boy, and others as a girl. But Riley isn't exactly out yet. And between starting a new school and having a congressman father running for reelection in uber-conservative Orange County, the pressure—media and otherwise—is building up in Riley's so-called “normal” life.

On the advice of a therapist, Riley starts an anonymous blog to vent those pent-up feelings and tell the truth of what it's *really* like to be gender fluid. But just as Riley's starting to settle in at school—even developing feelings for a mysterious outcast—the blog goes viral, and an unnamed commenter discovers Riley's real identity, threatening exposure. And Riley must make a choice: walk away from what the blog has created—a lifeline, new friends, a cause to believe in—or stand up, come out, and risk everything.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Riley writes, “I can't blame you for trying to categorize me. It's a human instinct” (p. 58). Why do you think we as humans have a need to identify others as boys or girls? How does this become problematic?
2. Why is calling Riley “it” (p. 5) more offensive than incorrectly assuming “he” or “she”? What should you do when you aren't sure which pronoun to use when addressing someone?
3. After a tough first day at school, Riley tells Mom, “I just really want to blend in here,” to which Mom replies, “Maybe ‘blending in’ is overrated.” When do you think it's important to blend in? When is it important to stand out?
4. In chapter 4, Riley can't even name one friend to call to hang out, but by the end of the book, Riley has Solo, Bec, the Queer Alliance group, and the blog community. How did being true to who Riley is lead to these friendships?
5. Draw from your own experiences online. What are some of the pros and cons of the anonymity you can have on the internet? In what ways does this anonymity give Riley courage? How does this same anonymity lead to problems with bullying?
6. When Riley tells Mom and Dad about the study date, Dad starts to ask if Riley's friend is a boy or a girl (p. 68). Why is this important to Dad? Why does Mom cut him off?
7. Why do you think Doctor Ann recommends that Riley start a blog? Considering both the positive and negative responses Riley receives, do you think the blog was ultimately a good thing or a bad thing for Riley? Why or why not?
8. When Vickers harasses Riley in the cafeteria, Solo stands up and tells him “Sit down, bro. You're being an ass” (p. 88). Think of other instances of bullying in the book. How could other characters have stepped in to stop bullies before things got worse?
9. Riley tells Solo, “So you gave up something you really loved just to fit in with a bunch of guys who laughed at you and called you fat,” to which Solo responds, “I didn't stop liking *Star Wars*, or even talking about it. I just stopped wearing the furry backpack to school” (p. 95). Have you ever changed something about yourself to fit in with a group? How did that make you feel?
10. Doctor Ann tells Riley, “As for wondering if it's okay to be who you are—that's not a symptom of mental illness. That's a symptom of being a person” (p. 110). Have you ever wondered if it's okay to be who you are? Have you ever felt you needed to hide a part of yourself in order to be accepted by others?
11. Reread Riley's blog response to Anonymous (p. 115–118). Do you agree with Riley's advice? Why or why not? If you had received that anonymous message, how would you have responded?
12. After the assault, Solo tells Riley, “I told you that you—*invited* it. By the way you dress. Remember? And I want you to know. . . that's bullshit. And it was not okay to say that” (p. 273). Why do you think people are quick to blame the victims in cases like these? In what ways does that perpetuate the problem?
13. Over the course of the book we learn that Riley attempted suicide, Anonymous (aka, Andie Gingham) thought about committing suicide, and Bec's sister actually did commit suicide. How do these experiences impact Riley? How is Andie Gingham's message, “If I can live through this, I can live through anything,” reflected throughout the story (p. 165)?

