

Evans, Cheryl B. (2016). I Promised Not to Tell: Raising a Transgender Child.
Ontario: Cheryl B. Evans.

Reviewed by: Brittany Fergusson, MacEwan University

Cheryl B Evans book, “I Promised Not to Tell”, provides a personal look at her family’s experience with the discovery and development of their transgender child, Jordan. In her writing, Evans systematically describes the events her family underwent, post and prior to the diagnosis of transgenderism. Evans assembles the book into four parts, each portraying a different step in the process of growing, learning, and understanding each member of the family. She discusses both the positive and negative experiences and emotions endured by the family to delineate their milestones. Effectively, this yields a raw and uncut perspective regarding her family’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions when confronted with a challenge residing outside of societal norms, standards, and expectations. She concludes her book with intimate thoughts, valuable tips, and a favorable vision for future generations.

Evans begins by introducing the behaviours and actions that initially made her daughter, Jordan, stand out. In the family’s early years, it was quickly evident that their “two daughters were even more different” than initially postulated (p. 10). She explains how “the thought that Jordan could be a transgendered child” had never resided in her mind (p. 15). In fact, she always just presumed she “had a very strong tomboy” on her hands (p. 15). An example that began to illustrate transgenderism was an occurrence where Jordan began to recognize the differences between her older sister and herself. She started to ask questions such as: “Why did God make

me a girl? Did I do something wrong?” (p. 15). Additionally, at an early age Jordan began expressing gender dysphoria stating that “[she felt] like a boy and [she wanted] to be one” too (p. 15). This initiates the timeline that sequentially dictates the events leading to the diagnosis of transgenderism.

Following the initial discovery of transgenderism, Evans thoroughly describes the process the family endured to accurately diagnose their daughter. She recounts the countless trips to therapists and doctors specializing in transgenderism. Eventually, the diagnosis that “Jordan was, in fact, transgender” quickly became a unanimous decision between the entirety of medical professionals (p. 33).

Although the acceptance of transgenderism was easy for some members of the family, there were a few who struggled. Evans efficiently describes the animosity Jordan’s elder sister, Mariah, acquired upon the disclosure of the diagnosis. Originally, Evans and her husband were cautious with Mariah, withholding most of the information regarding Jordan’s gender identity crisis. Upon the unveiling of the diagnosis, Mariah was quite upset and felt as though she was losing her sister. Mariah sought support from a Christian couple in their community, who told her that Jordan’s affliction with gender dysphoria was “not of god”; Evans describes these three words to be completely distressing for her entire family (p. 50).

Conclusively, Evans describes the process of the self-acceptance of Jordan, as well as how the family perseveres through. Fully transitioning Jordan from female-to-male required numerous surgeries. The first, at fourteen years of age, was a difficult decision to come to. At the end of Jordan’s transition, Evan states how her son changed from “withdrawn and depressed” to an “outgoing gregarious personality” (p. 184). She then describes a conversation during which

Jordan states that the decisions to transition was his own and expresses to his mom, ““If I were to regret anything, which I won’t, I would not blame you”” (p. 202). After the multiple surgeries to re-assign his gender, Mariah too began to support Jordan. Accordingly, Mariah now “caringly refers to Jordan as her brother and has accepted the change” (p. 189).

Throughout the book, Evans proposes multiple obstacles that she and her family had to overcome. Similar to what Mariah faced with the Christian family, Evans struggled with the idea of God’s acceptance. Ultimately, she pursued help from a counselor for advice and guidance. However, the only guidance Evans received was that she should not worry because they would be able to “fix” Jordan (p. 56). Later on, Evans had established a friendship with another mother, Sandra, who also had a transgender child. Prior to a meeting for their two sons, Evans was informed that Sandra’s son, Dillion, had taken his own life. While this news was hard for Evans to learn, it was even harder for her husband, Jim. Jim expressed that the passing of Dillion gave him “a taste of what it would be like to actually lose a child... it really made him realize just how serious this situation with Jordan was” (p. 67).

Additionally, Evans consistently provided readers with questions and advice to ponder while constructing her story. For example, she invites those struggling to accept transgenderism to move forward, whether it is “getting to a place where you are ready to help your child... getting counselling for you and your child... getting educated on the topic” (p. 100). Another great example is the human rights issues concerning washroom use. Laws in certain states or provinces pressure individuals to use the bathroom that attributes to their assigned sex. Under these laws, a transitioning man would be required to use the woman’s washroom due to his female genital. Although, it is likely he would be scolded or kicked out of a woman’s washroom

due to his outward masculine appearance. Evans states how “people in dire need of a toilet rush into the opposite [gender] washroom when the line to theirs [is] too long” or how “parents often accompany small children into washrooms, putting either the child or parent in the “wrong” washroom” (p. 157). She questions why those two situations are legal while a trans-person using the washroom that aligns with their gender identity is not (p. 157).

Conversely, Evans is thoroughly careful with her wording throughout the book to appease all. Transgenderism is regarded with a negative connotation by many religions. She makes a point to state that she does “have respect for others that have a different opinion and choose to follow a different path” no matter how much she disagrees with them (p. 60).

Evans concludes her book with positivity, offering guidance for parents who are situated in a position similar to her own. She offers her email address, “writtenbymom@gmail.com” in hopes of offering solace to those in need of comfort, or have questions and are seeking advice (p. 205). In addition, she adds a list of helpful trans-related resources, including the websites that Jordan bought his bindings and packers from, which are items used to make trans-men features more masculine. She also adds the names of medical doctors who Jordan received his surgeries from. Moreover, she provides a chapter of definitions relevant to the transgender community in hopes to further educate society.

This book accomplishes three goals through Evans’ illustrative examples, informative advice, and personal stories. First, she describes the experience, thoughts, and feelings a family undergoes as one of their own changes gender. Second, she accurately interprets the feelings and challenges that one with transgenderism can face. Third, Evans provides readers with positive tips and advice. She does her best to educate the readers while effectively communicating her story.

Evans intended audience is specifically families who are encountering a situation similar to her own, as well as sociologists and psychologists who are studying the field of transgenderism at an individual and family perspective. Contrarily, this book is also geared towards the education of transgenderism to society as a whole. Regarding her book, she states that if she could “help even one transgender person or one family find peace then it has been a success” (p. 194).

Although Evans book was initially written as a journal, used to record her thoughts as a “very private, personal, therapy session”, its transformation into a book aims to “help change some of society's negative views towards the transgender community” (pp. 2-3). I do challenge the external validity of this book; to what degree can Evans experience be related to other families? She continuously mentions how Jordan was “one of the lucky ones” for having a family full of love and support (p. 32). Moreover, how likely can a family reading this book expect to attain the same acceptance and support from peers, friends, and extended family? Indefinitely, this book is great at highlighting what a family with transgenderism may go through, but cannot be generalized to the trans population as a whole. In many ways, this book can help with families struggling with gender dysphoria, homosexuality, and other gender/sex related conditions come to terms of acceptance and understanding. This book was easy to read, exciting, and informational. I would gladly recommend this book because it is not only helpful for those undergoing the process of transgenderism, but will also help the cisgender population understand the struggles and torment that a transgender individual and their family can face.