

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

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Cheryl B. Evan's book, "I Promised Not to Tell: Raising a Transgender Child", is a very personal and intimate narrative of a family's unfolding experiences with "discovering the son they never knew they had" (p. 2). This book is written by a mother whose perspective about transgender people is transformed through her son's journey. The purpose of this book is to offer hope, knowledge and support to anyone who is on a transgender journey or has a friend, relative or family member who is a transgender person. This book sheds light on the much talked about yet little understood social issue: transgenderism. It explores the various struggles faced by the transgender community in today's society that is filled with extremists, critical and religiously ignorant people. In doing so, Evans open-mindedly questions the strongly held views of the society on the topic of transgenderism. In the book, Evans patiently and bravely explores sensitive topics like religion, mental health, and other beliefs and policies that surround transgenderism.

One of the most painful ideas that exists in the society is the idea that a transgender child is "not of God" (p. 56). This idea or belief seems very stringent and harsh. Being a mother is in itself quite challenging. It requires juggling one's child's needs and the needs of the society in which the family resides. Now imagine being a mother of a child who is labelled by the society

as “not of God” (p. 56). Evans shares that it is quite sad to see that some families struggle with transgenderism and religion. In the book, Evans sets out to discover “What does God think about transgender people” (p. 55). The question is quite thought provoking. Evans finds out that “the word of God says love thy neighbour, it doesn’t say love thy neighbour except for the ones you do not like” (p. 58). Evans explains that to God what really matters is one’s heart and not what one looks like. Evans strongly believes that the only thing that should and does matter is ‘love’. In God’s eyes all of his creation is equal and each and every one deserves love and care. “Why is it so easy to accept that people can be born with something extra, missing or mismatched like a limb but can’t have something extra, missing or mismatched with their brain?” (p. 60). By asking this question, Evans encourages people to think beyond what meets the eye. With so many strongly held beliefs that are against transgender people, one can only imagine what it is like to live everyday battling the rigid norms and beliefs that the society and religious extremists pose on people. It can really crush and destroy one’s inner peace and sense of self. What makes acceptance so easy and simple for Evans is her belief that, “we are all spiritual beings having a human experience, therefore when [she thinks] of what a spiritual being is [she does] not see gender, for gender to [her] only comes into play in [the] human experience.” (p. 61). Evans conveys quite gracefully that acceptance is the key to love and accept everyone and hence, finding peace within oneself.

“Gender Dysphoria is the term used to describe a person whose gender identity does not line up with the gender they were assigned at birth” (p. 211). A common belief that the society holds is that gender dysphoria is a mental illness. Evans argues that just because a transgender person experiences conflict it does not mean that, that is something the transgender person has

developed over time. It is something that has been with them since the time of birth or even before. Evans supports her belief by stating: “the fact their gender identity does not align with their biological sex does not, in my opinion, warrant classifying them as mentally ill” (p. 101). Labelling transgenderism as a mental illness, Evans believes, suggests that it is something that can be “fixed”. By labelling transgenderism as a mental illness, the society tries to convince transgender people that they can be “fixed”. In doing so, they “try to force the gender questioning youth to conform to their sexual gender assigned at birth” (p. 105). Ironically, as Evans believes, labelling transgenderism as a mental illness could lead to some serious mental health issues that the transgender people may end up facing. Evans hopes to witness, someday, transgenderism being delisted as a mental illness both by the American Psychiatric Association and hopefully, eventually by the World Health Organization (p. 105).

The most fundamental thing about transgender people that Evans wants people to understand is that, “transgender people truly believe they are the gender they identify with!” (p. 149). Therefore, people who are completely oblivious to what it is like to be a transgender end up “forcing transgender people to use the washroom that matches their birth sex rather than their gender identity” (p. 149). In the book, Evans sheds light on the much controversial topic: “which washrooms transgender people should use?” (p. 149). Evans tries to explain to the non-transgender audience what it would be like if they were forced to use the opposite sex’s washroom. (p. 150). Like non-transgender people, transgender people also equally hold the right to use the washroom of the sex that they identify with. However, it has never been so simple for the transgender people. Along with the many other struggles, the battle against the strongly held opinions of social media, religious extremists etc. on the topic of ‘washroom’, is a battle that

transgender people fight almost every single day. In the book, Evans explores and explains in depth the issues that the social media and policies bring up when it comes to catering to the appropriate washroom needs of the transgender people. The social media has attached issues like pedophilia, rapes, assault to the topic of usage of washrooms by transgender people. Although being “unaware of any statistics that support [the above] theory”, Evans yet strongly believes that “keeping transgender people out of the washrooms they identify with is certainly not the answer” (p. 151). Evans further emphasizes that to assault another person is already illegal in the eyes of law (p. 151). Therefore, when the society imposes washroom laws on transgender people, those laws are merely “about discriminating against, hating and even fearing a group of individuals that are so grossly misunderstood by so many members of the society” (p. 151).

Towards the end of the book, in her final thoughts, Evans once again highlights her intention of writing this book. Evans, in the book, states, “so many transgender people have wonderful stories to share that can be of great value to others but often those stories never get told for fear of being exposed. I hope that publishing this book was not a mistake and that it resonates with those who need it most. If it can help even one transgender person or one family to find peace then it has been a success, in my opinion” (p. 194). With that being said, Evan’s intended readership goes beyond just transgender people and/or their families, friends, relatives. It could be inferred quite a few times in the book that the intention is also to bring about a sense of awareness, in the non-transgender community, about what transgenderism is and the various struggles transgender people face in our society. Anyone who is curious and wants to genuinely gain knowledge and an understanding about the social issue ‘transgenderism’ will find this book useful. It is a book “written from a mother’s perspective” (p. 219). Although Evans aims to

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spread awareness about the issues transgender people have to face in today's society, this book will also aid in promoting greater interaction among researchers in sociology and psychology mainly about the topic of society vs transgender people and the interaction between them. This book will engage multiple disciplines- mainly sociology, psychology and social work. Other disciplines that may benefit from the book are religious studies, law, genetics, and philosophy. I found the book very informative, in that, it really is an eye-opener. At the end of the book, a list of helpful resources and list of terms are provided to help understand the book more efficiently. I feel grateful to have read such a powerful story. I am deeply touched. I would recommend this book to anyone who is looking to broaden their knowledge.