

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

Reviewed by: Rebecca Richards, MacEwan University

Cheryl B. Evans' book, "I Promised Not to Tell: Raising a Transgender Child", is a profoundly personal narrative of one mothers' experience in raising a transgender child. Throughout her journey to discovering the son she never knew she had, Evans reflects on moments of self-discovery and highlights the trials and tribulations encountered along the way. In telling her story, Evans tackles many of the larger societal issues faced by transgender individuals, while offering hope, encouragement and support to those who may be on a similar path themselves.

Evans, like many mothers, "just want[ed] a happy healthy child" (p. 32) and for most of Jordan's childhood, that is exactly what she had – a happy, healthy daughter. However, growing up Jordan was a "strong tomboy" (p. 15). Among many other things, Jordan preferred to keep his hair short, to wear boys clothing and to play with trucks instead of dolls. As a result, Jordan was often easily mistaken for a boy – an error which Evans was always quick to correct. At the time, Evans had no knowledge of what it meant to be transgender, let alone did she think her daughter was transgender. However, as the years progressed and the societal pressure to conform increased, Jordan took on a new appearance, one which more commonly reflected that of a female identity. With this new identity came many consequences for Jordan, the biggest one being that he was no longer a happy child but rather very "withdrawn and antisocial" (p. 27). This dramatic change in Jordan's personality is ultimately what caught Evans attention and soon

after, it became very apparent that Jordan was not in fact a girl, but was rather a transgender boy. Following this realization, Evans was forced to “mourn the loss of [her] daughter and learn to welcome [her] son” (p. 49). This acceptance reflects a pivotal point in Evans own self-discovery, as her eyes were opened to a whole other world she did not even know existed and yet, without much hesitation she demonstrated the unconditional love she has for her child through her determination to support Jordan as he navigated through understanding his gender identity and subsequent transition. It is through all the highs and lows experienced in raising a transgender child that Evans gains a new found understanding for what transgenderism means and ultimately grows as a person along side her son.

In addition to reflecting on her own personal feelings during Jordan’s transition, Evans emphasizes many of the larger societal issues that impact transgender individuals. One such issue is that which pertains to obtaining documentation that states the individuals preferred gender. Having a legal document which states a gender opposite to how one identifies can be psychologically harmful, therefore, it is of the utmost importance that transgender individuals are easily able to make the appropriate changes. Unfortunately, as Evan discusses, getting something as simple as a driver’s licence which states Jordan’s appropriate gender, was not an easy task. It required multiple, somewhat counterintuitive, steps which included applying for a name change on his birth certificate, a new SIN card stating male and finally a government ID. Obtaining a new birth certificate which stated male, was far more difficult. Jordan was initially required to have “undergone at least one sex reassignment surgery and present a medical application” (p. 130). However, despite meeting these requirements, a recent change in law now required Jordan to be at least eighteen years old to change his gender from female to male on his

birth certificate. As such, it was not without countless phone calls, emails and even letters that Evans and Jordan were successfully able to change the law to include minors. Through this experience, Evans truly emphasizes the importance in advocating for change, especially those which concern transgender individuals, by encouraging people to “rally for what [they] believe is important and push and challenge [their] governments” (p. 147).

Another issue, which Evans placed a great deal of emphasis, is on the use of washrooms, and in particular, which washroom a transgender individual can or cannot use. Evans outlines very clearly that:

The most basic thing about transgender people is they truly believe they are the gender they identify with! Transgender women do not think of themselves as men wearing women’s clothing, they ARE women. Naturally, they should be in a woman’s washroom. (p. 149)

Despite this simple and logical reasoning, there exists a lot of controversy surrounding which washrooms are for which people. One of the main arguments made is that washroom use is dependent on genitalia. That is to say that those who have male genitalia belong in the mens washroom, while those with female genitalia belong in the women’s washroom. However, for a transgender person, their genitalia often does not correspond to their gender identity, such as in the case of Jordan. By that same token, washroom use has also been argued as being dependent on the gender listed on one’s birth certificate, which also does not always properly match one’s gender identity. As such, both arguments pose a problem for transgender individuals who have either been unsuccessful changing their birth certificate gender, or have not yet had/do not wish to have sex reassignment surgery. In not allowing transgender individuals to use the washroom that corresponds to their gender identity, they are “at risk of humiliation, embarrassment and

possible bullying” (p. 155). Not to mention the fact, that a transgender male like Jordan, who “presents completely male” (p. 155), would certainly turn heads if he were to walk into a woman’s washroom. Evans ultimately argues that in forcing transgender individuals to use the washroom of their birth sex is a “discriminatory injustice” which serves only to “erase decades of progress” (p. 162).

Evans undoubtedly intended that this book be read by those who may be facing the same issues. However, it is also beneficial for those who know someone who is transgender, and/or for those who are curious and eager to deepen their understanding. As such, this book serves to not only remind transgender individuals that they are not alone in their experiences, but also shed light on transgenderism in an informative manner. Furthermore, Evans’ book helps parents recognize, and accept that their child may be transgender and offers hope, encouragement and the resources necessary to do so effectively. In addition, I believe this book to be useful for those who are interested in analyzing the shifts in family dynamics following an unprecedented change, such as discovering your child is transgender, as well as those interested in studying the social ramifications for transgender individuals. A few academic disciplines that may, therefore, benefit from this book are sociology, psychology, child development and social work.

Evans began writing this book with the soul intent to document her journey in raising her transgender child. However, in deciding to publish her story, Evans hoped to raise awareness, open minds and offer encouragement to others in a similar situation. Evans accomplishes just that, all while keeping a promise to her son that she would not tell. Overall, I found “I Promised Not to Tell: Raising a Transgender Child” a pleasure to read. It was emotionally captivating and inspiring, while also remaining insightful and informative. In sharing her story, Evans tackles

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and clarifies many of the myths and falsehoods regarding transgenderism and fosters a safe space for people to talk openly about what being transgender really means. I would recommend it to anyone who is on a similar path or to those who simply want to broaden their understanding of transgenderism.