



Barkin, Janna. (2017). He's Always Been My Son: A Mother's Story about Raising her Transgender Son. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Reviewed by: Krista Archimowitz, Macewan University

Janna Barkin's book "He's Always Been My Son", is a book that describes the life of Amaya Barkin, a transgender individual and his family. This book is nonfiction and is written from a first-person point of view, with Janna, Amaya's mother, narrating the bulk of the chapters. Other family members and friends of the family also provide their perspectives on the impact of Amaya's change. This book takes place over the course of several years and discusses Amaya's childhood through to his college years. The author seeks to provide information regarding the transgender transformation process and encourage empathy and understanding for transgender individuals. Janna Barkin's goal when writing this book was to provide positive guidance and motivation to those going through a similar journey (p. 14). The author highlights the challenges of being a transgender individual, including the stigma and stress of coping in a binary world, in hopes of creating more understanding of what transgender people experience on a daily basis. Janna Barkin also discusses the positive experiences and the support from family, friends and agencies that she and her family received.

A significant theme throughout this book is the stigma associated with being transgender and the impact on individuals who identify as such. The transgender identity challenges the tra-

ditional assumption that an individual's biological sex at birth equals their gender. These traditional beliefs can be more prevalent in some geographic areas and the author discusses that her family is lucky to live in California, which is a more accepting community (p. 15). The author provides examples of how gender beliefs are so deep-seated, that transgender individuals question what they are feeling about their gender and may be reluctant to express their gender identity. Janna Barkin notes that she and her family offered to call Amaya a boy in order to reduce confusion in public and Amaya declined (p. 76). Amaya came out on Facebook by changing her identity from female to male but later stated that it was a mistake and he was unsure how it got changed (p. 132). Barkin also notes that Amaya would communicate by email about issues related to his transgender status as he was worried his parents would judge him.

Religious beliefs discussed in this book indicate that religion may play a role in the stigma faced by transgender individuals. For example, Amaya's friend, "K", was not allowed to wear boy's underwear or cut her hair as this alternate gender expression violated her parent's religious beliefs (p.78). When going to meet an online friend of Amaya's who lived in Texas, it was revealed that the father was a minister and that the family believed that if their daughter spent time with Amaya, she would become a lesbian (p. 170). The mother of the girl was so afraid to be caught by her un-approving family, that she contributed to the discrimination and stigma with her rude behaviour toward Amaya and Janna.

Stigma may also be a result of lack of education, which can lead to blind acceptance of societal beliefs by individuals who are uninformed or have not been exposed to diversity. Gabe Barkin, Amaya's father, highlights his experience with gay people and how he grew up quite

“ignorant” due to lack of exposure. Gabe refers to the ingrained nature of traditional beliefs when he observes that “Even now I can tap into the soft bigotry of my youthful ignorance and lack of exposure, and the memory of those impressions helps me understand the fear that people feel when confronted with things that are new, things that have been portrayed with negative and pervasive stereotypes for so long” (p. 93).

Janna Barkin reflects throughout the book on the binary structure of society and how deeply embedded the beliefs are. As Amaya was being born, his older sister Emily was given the important job to announce whether the baby was a boy or a girl. This simple task highlights how the concept of gendering a child based on their biological sex is an unconscious practice (p.36). Although Janna Barkin identified that she tries to follow Amaya’s lead in regard to gender expression, she struggled with allowing her daughter to wear boy’s underwear. She notes that she believed that “girl’s parts should have girls underwear” (p. 55), but realized that she did not have a rationale for this belief. Before Amaya had transitioned, he made a statement about wanting to be a grandpa and his mother corrected him stating that girls grow up to be grandmas (p. 70). The author notes that she now regrets that she felt the need to label her child in a traditional way. Her response was a reaction based on the ideology of society.

The reinforcement of binary gender standards is seen through gendered bathrooms and dressing rooms. This forces transgender people to make a choice that may conflict with their gender expression and appearance. They may also have to deal with discrimination from other people who believe they are using the wrong bathroom or misgender them. Barkin notes that Amaya avoided using the bathroom at school or in public which led to mental and physical anguish (p. 96). The

author states that “denying a trans person the right to use the bathroom that matches their gender identity is an act of discrimination, one that can have devastating consequences” (p. 157).

The use of pronouns and even given names can create challenges due to society’s binary perspective. The author notes that when Amaya was young, she and her husband would correct people if they misgendered Amaya as her appearance was masculine, which caused confusion and embarrassment for Amaya (p. 73). Janna Barkin states that it was so difficult for some to accept that Amaya appeared to be a boy but was a girl, that strangers would argue with her about the gender of her son (p. 73). Amaya also experienced the struggle of having a name that does not match his gender. Despite the family being very accepting, his grandmother demonstrated binary thinking as she questioned why he chose to keep a “feminine” name if he identified as male (p. 187).

On a more hopeful note, Janna Barkin highlights the experiences of acceptance and changing beliefs in society. Acceptance is reflected in Amaya’s friends and family’s reactions to his transition and their support of him as a person regardless of gender expression. Emily, Amaya’s sister, discusses how although Amaya transitioned to a different gender, she was happy for him to be able to express himself and is proud to have him as a brother (p. 240). Friends of Amaya showed their support by congratulating him on his top surgery with a card that read “Congratulations on your booblessness” (p. 198). Janna Barkin mentions strangers along the way that she dubs as “heroes” who understood Amaya’s discomfort with using the women’s bathroom without needing an explanation (p. 101).

The author also offers examples of advocacy in society and the changing beliefs about

transgender identity. The Trans March in San Francisco is a representation of acceptance and support for transgender individuals. During the march, Amaya took off his shirt and proudly displayed his top surgery scars (p. 208). The journal entries of Amaya's grandmother also delineate a shift in societal beliefs. In her initial entry she worries that "nasty brutes out there will make trouble for him" however in one of her later entries, she is focused on Amaya's positive future (p. 266). Amaya's grandmother noted that Amaya will go off to college and that Portland "is said to be a congenial city for the LGBTQ community..." (p. 269) and that openly transgender individuals have won seats in the senate (p. 270).

Janna Barkin meets her goal of increasing understanding of and knowledge about the issues for transgender individuals, however a limitation of the book is that it mainly portrays a positive and accepting experience of transitioning. Amaya's family and friends were extremely encouraging and loving towards him, but that may not always be the case. Transgender individuals may not be supported by their family, and as a result, they may not be able to transition openly or have the financial support that Amaya did. I believe that this book may present a scenario that is not reality for many transitioning individuals. The book could however be a support to transitioning individuals and their families as the Barkin family was willing to share their experiences, both successes and regrets, in an honest way. Janna Barkin offers some helpful resources and insights that could result in a smoother journey for transgender individuals and their friends and family. Additionally, professionals in the medical and human services field may find the book a helpful window into the impact of their approach when working with transgender individuals. I fall into the latter category and feel that the book has provided technical knowledge and resulted in my deeper understanding of the emotional impacts of transitioning.