# The Hub: Your Connection to Teen ReadsTransgender Characters in Teen Literature: An Interview with Author Ellen Wittlinger

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YALSA’s Young Adult Library Services Journal recently featured a [*list of titles featuring transgender teens*](http://www.yalsa.ala.org/yals/trans-titles-for-young-adults-summer-2013/)*, including the book*[*Parrotfish*](http://www.worldcat.org/title/parrotfish/oclc/69020860&referer=brief_results)*by Ellen Wittlinger. The books tells the story of Grady, a high school student who identifies as a male and the difficulties and support he faces at school and home. The story is told with humor, warmth, and a deep respect for the courage Grady displays in forging his identity. I was lucky to ask Ellen Wittlinger a few questions.*

**I think to some degree, defining your identity and constructing your self is a part of any adolescent experience, and makes stories about transgender characters relatable. How did you think about the process of constructing a gender identity for Grady in *Parrotfish?* In general, how do you as a writer signify gender identities in your characters? How does the gender identity of a character affect the way you think about them as you are creating them?**

I’m going to answer your first two questions together because my answer is pretty much the same for both. How does the gender identity of a character affect the way I think about them? It doesn’t necessarily. The way I begin to think about a character is to imagine who they are at their core, their center. I think everyone is pretty similar deep down, no matter what their gender, race, religion, or ethnicity happens to be. I look for the place in which we’re all human–that’s where to begin building the character. In other words, I don’t begin with the differences, but with the similarities we all share, things like, our hope for a good life, our fear of death, our need for love. The *big* things.

Next, I begin to layer on the features that make this character different from others. For some characters race, for example, may be a more defining aspect of who they are, while for others gender is more important to their self-definition. For some characters gender may not be particularly defining at all. But in any case, I’ve now only reached some mid-level of definition. The outer layers are where the character really becomes unique. If you stop with those mid-levels of definition, you’ll be writing stereotypes. You need to go farther, even with secondary characters. The outer layers are where the character comes alive. At this level, I begin to understand their fears, their worries, their desires, their dreams. The family and the environment they were born into also affects who they are. Everything about the world they live in carries the possibility of changing who that character is. And these outer influences affect every character somewhat differently too, because of the unique personality of that particular character, and the difference does not depend on their gender.

So, while I might write a character for whom gender is of the utmost importance—a boy who defines himself by his (perhaps stereotypical) masculinity or a girl who sees herself as uber-feminine, those would certainly not be the only defining qualities of their characters. And, in truth, my main characters are almost never those kids. I prefer to write about teenagers who think about themselves in a somewhat more complex way. Not that they necessarily think their gender is fluid (though some may) but they probably don’t see gender as the frontline definition of who they are either.

To get a little more specific about Grady in *Parrotfish*, I should say that I worked closely with a friend who is female-to-male transgender in order to understand as much as possible the feeling of having your gender misunderstood in this way. As I constructed Grady’s gender identity I was aware of basing it very closely on what my friend was describing to me. I don’t think I’d ever before written about something I had so little personal experience with, and I wanted to make sure I got it right. Therefore, Grady’s character and his emotional journey (although not his story) is pretty close to that of my friend.

**How do you incorporate humor in a story like Grady’s without trivializing the subject matter?**

Humor is not something that stands outside the story—any story—but a part of every life, every day. Even if the most terrible things are happening, we look for a way to laugh. How many times have you been at a funeral and suddenly laughter explodes through your tears? We need it; we search for it, maybe especially at the most difficult times. Humor will only trivialize the story if it isn’t an integral part of it, if it’s a kind of joke laid over the top. In the case of *Parrotfish*, I saw the subplot of the Dad’s over-the-top obsession with Christmas, and particularly the play they put on annually for the neighborhood, as an echo of the rest of their lives. Dad wants them to put on costumes and enact a show in which they appear to be the simple, but loving Cratchit family. But the kids have outgrown both the costumes and the childishness of it (as Grady has outgrown *his*mask and no longer wants to pretend to be who he isn’t.) Once they can fully accept each other, they don’t need to pretend to be a perfect family because they pretty much are one. It seemed to me that Dad’s crazy ideas were organically funny to the story. The best comedy always has a dark side, and the best poignant story makes you laugh through your tears.

**Can you think of any other depictions of transgender characters in the media that might have teen appeal? I remember being really into the musical *Hedwig and Angry Inch* and am excited  to see it returning to Broadway with Neil Patrick Harris.The recent cartoon SheZow features a boy whose super-hero alter ego is a girl– but the character does not transition or express any wish to.**

One transgender character I’m really enjoying right now is on the Netflix show, “Orange is the New Black.” She’s one of the inmates in the prison. The characterization is nicely complex and doesn’t depend on stereotypes. Not sure if this is exactly a show for teens though. And yeah, I can’t wait to see NPH in Hedwig, too!

**Thank you for allowing us inside your writing process, Ellen! And for sharing thoughtful insight on the subject of transgender teens in fiction.**

*Transgender teens are also recently  the subject of a new law in California, stating that this coming school year students will be able to compete on sports teams and use facilities such as bathrooms based on their gender identities rather than their sex. (Readers can learn a bit more about the law*[*here*](http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-transgender-20130813,0,4811697.story)*). How would a character like Grady be affected by such a law? How will students react to this change? I believe that the need for fiction that reflects the experiences and struggles of trans teens and their peers will become more important than ever in deepening understanding and respect among teens– and adults. Find many examples to dig into on the*[*list compiled by Talya Sokoll for YALS*](http://www.yalsa.ala.org/yals/trans-titles-for-young-adults-summer-2013/)*.*

*-Mia Cabana, currently reading The 5th Wave by Rick Yancey*