

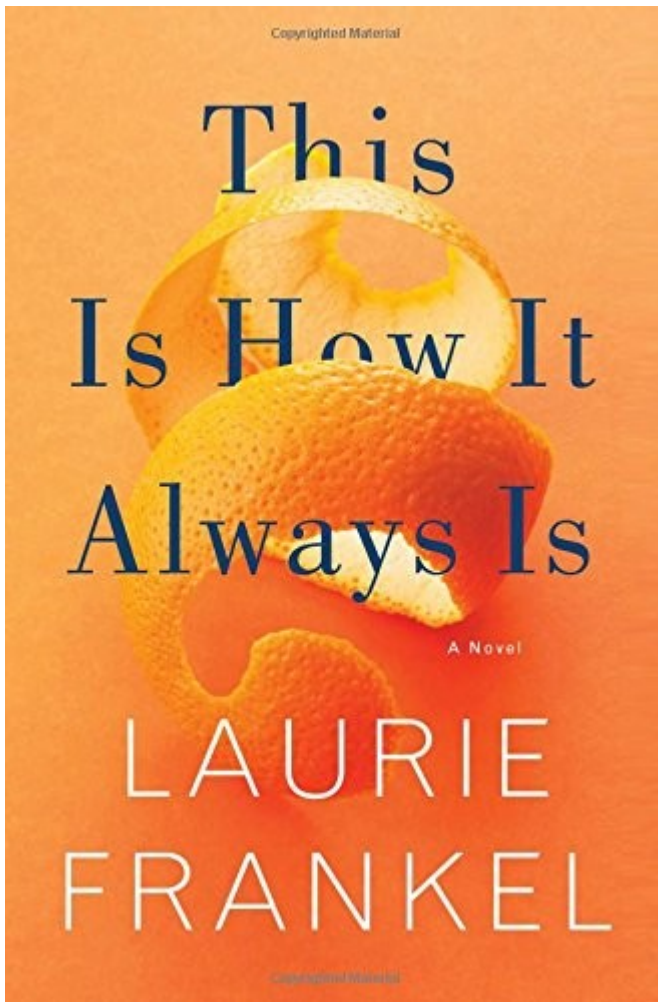
A transgender child in fiction

Beautifully honest, this novel blurs the line between fiction and reality.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

March 22, 2017

In Review



This Is How It Always Is

A Novel

by Laurie Frankel
Flatiron Books

A few days before they let their son Claude go to kindergarten in a dress and fairy wings, Penn says to Rosie: “This is how it always is. You have to make these huge decisions on behalf of your kid, this tiny human whose fate and future is entirely in your hands, who trusts you to know what’s good and right and then to be able to make that happen.” Claude is the youngest of five boys, and Penn’s statement reflects the wary honesty that many parents will recognize as a universal phenomenon. But raising a child whose gender identity doesn’t match her biology is uniquely challenging, and these challenges begin to surface as Penn elaborates:

You never have enough information. You don’t get to see the future. And if you screw up, if with your incomplete, contradictory information you make the wrong call, well, nothing less than your child’s entire future and happiness is at stake. It’s impossible. It’s heartbreaking. It’s maddening. But there’s no alternative.

The rest of the novel portrays the impossible, heartbreaking, maddening dance of the whole family as Claude lives into her new identity as Poppy. It’s an endearingly quirky family, one that seems almost too good to be true. Rosie and Penn make large sacrifices for their child, including at one point moving across the country. They get the rest of the children on board with their efforts to protect and nurture Poppy. They thoughtfully ponder (and sometimes live out) various alternatives: secrecy versus openness, pre-adolescent hormone blockers versus waiting for post-adolescent medical intervention, warning Poppy that she’s different from most girls versus letting her continue to believe that her body is the same as those of her friends.

Laurie Frankel’s portrayal of raising a transgender child carries such authenticity that I wasn’t surprised to learn that the novel is based on [her own experiences](#). The prose is vivid, and the pedagogy that appears in the book is usually gentle enough that it doesn’t distract from the narrative. Rosie is a doctor, so her discussions with Penn about medical options for Poppy come across as both authoritative and real. Contrasting gender dysphoria with the childhood diabetes and heart disease she

encounters at work, she laments:

This is a medical issue, but mostly it's a cultural issue. It's a social issue and an emotional issue and a family dynamic issue and a community issue. Maybe we need to medically intervene so Poppy doesn't grow a beard. Or maybe the world needs to learn to love a person with a beard who goes by 'she' and wears a skirt.

When Penn responds with a sense of defeat, "but that's not going to happen," Rosie continues: "In which case maybe she—and you and I—need to learn to live in a world that refuses to accept a person with a beard who goes by 'she' and wears a skirt and be happy anyway."

Dialogue of this sort, which runs throughout the book, raises important questions about what it means to parent with uncertainty, to hover between categories. Rosie and Penn's discussions sometimes feel moralizing (and particularly their final talk, which happens at a junior high dance and combines a maddeningly pedantic tone with over-the-top happy-ending cheesiness). But the book's moralizing is of a refreshing sort: it's aimed toward accommodating the fluidity of gender amid all of life's ambiguities and trusting people to negotiate that fluidity within their communities of care.

In Poppy's world, teeming with big brothers, this care appears in surprising, often humorous ways. One of the most delightful parts of the book is the continual bedtime story that Penn tells over the years, first to his girlfriend Rosie and then to his children as they grow up. The characters, Prince Grumwald and Princess Stephanie, evolve alongside the children. "Penn had never tried to disguise the ways Grumwald's adventures mirrored his kids'. Fairy tales aren't about subtlety, after all, and teenagers will ignore a moral if you let them." Grumwald studies for the SAT's instead of going to the movies, triple-proofreads his college applications, and practices safe sex. Princess Stephanie eats hummus made with magic beans that prevent her from spontaneously transforming into her secret identity as a night fairy.

If Frankel's story intersects with the lives and struggles of her readers even half as much as Penn's story intersects with his family's—and my guess is that it will—then she has done her job as a novelist.