

## **Freak Boy (Freakboy)**

Kristin Elizabeth Clark

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013

### **Reviews**

- [Booklist](#) (15 Oct. 2013. Featured review): “When Brendan Chase types “Want to be a girl” into his Mac’s search engine, one pops up: transsexual. In Clark’s raw, honest debut novel, told in verse, three voices capture a few experiences of teens on the transgender spectrum. Brendan is “not one of those people / who’s always wanted to wear a dress. / Who’s always known / he should have been born female.” Sex with girlfriend Vanessa, although confusing, feels good, and Brendan questions throughout whether or not he’s trans. Fortunately, there’s an angel in his life—literally. Angel, trans without sex-reassignment surgery (“My junk doesn’t dictate who I am”), fights against demons of her own and struggles to reconnect with her younger brother. She’s a volunteer at Willows, a center for queer teens, and eventually introduces Brendan to terms like gender identity, gender attraction, genderqueer, and gender fluid. Meanwhile, the third voice belongs to Vanessa, a girl on the boy’s wrestling team, who can’t understand why her boyfriend, Brendan, is suddenly so distant. Unlike many novels that deal with one transgender character, this movingly explores so many gender identities, from the three main characters (each appears in a different font) to Angel’s roommates. A must have for library shelves, this will be popular with fans of Ellen Hopkins.”
- [Booklist](#) (15 Oct. 2014. “TOP 10 FIRST NOVELS FOR YOUTH”): “A magical-realist romance, a gutsy exploration of gender identity, a sci-fi thriller, and a dandy middle-grade fantasy adventure account for just a few of this year’s 10 best first novels, reviewed in Booklist from October 15, 2013, to October 1, 2014. “When Brendan types “want to be a girl” into his Mac’s search engine, one word pops up; transsexual. In Clark’s raw, honest, novel-in-verse, three voices movingly explore many gender identities on the spectrum.”
- [Horn Book](#) (Nov/Dec 2013): “Brendan, an upper-middle-class high-school wrestler, is confused and ashamed. He loves his girlfriend, Vanessa, but is afraid of how he relates to women—he likes girls “too much, / and not in / the same / way / everyone / else / does.” He is disgusted by his own body, which, with its short hair and lack of hips, feels wrong. Angel, on the other hand, loves herself unapologetically. Now college-aged, Angel was thrown out of her home, mocked and abused by her father, and beaten by a sadistic john. A chance meeting brings Brendan and Angel together and, with Vanessa, their stories wind together in three-part verse-harmony. Each individual has a unique personality all his or her own. Angel, a transgender woman, is resilient and compassionate. While she acts as the moral compass of the book, she is not the gender-ambiguous “angel” her name

implies—her character is never preachy or hyperbolic. Clark portrays the delicate inner life of Vanessa with aching clarity. And the depiction of Brendan’s emotional state—his confusion, fear, disgust, and feeling of “wrongness”—is vivid and painful. A sincere, profound rendering of sexuality, queerness, and identity.”

- [Kirkus](#) (15 Sept 2013): “A must-buy that showcases three teen voices in free verse as they experience just a few of the myriad ways people experience gender nonconformity. Brendan is a reluctant wrestler and a dutiful boyfriend. His social life is a minefield, his athlete friends casual with their homophobia. One dreadful day, the wrestling team all dresses as cheerleaders, just a joke—for everyone else. Vanessa is Brendan’s girlfriend, a wrestler herself. The only girl on the boys’ team, Vanessa defends herself against homophobia at school and a family who tell her, “No boy wants a rough girl.” Her love for Brendan is a signpost that she’s normal. Angel is an indomitable community college student who’s seen her share of the crap life throws at queer kids: beaten and rejected by her father, almost killed by a john. She works at the Willows Teen LGBTQ Center, helping other teens, says she’s “blessed to like me / the way I am,” and is unbent even by the vandalism Brendan commits in a fit of internalized transphobia. In alternating and distinct sections, these three young adults navigate love, family and society. Angel’s position at the LGBTQ center provides narrative justification for the occasional infodump. There are no simple answers, readers learn, but there will always be victories and good people. Though the verse doesn’t always shine, it’s varied, with concrete poems and duets keeping the voices lively. This gutsy, tripartite poem explores a wider variety of identities—cis-, trans-, genderqueer—than a simple transgender storyline, making it stand out.” (Fiction. 12-17).
- [Library Media Connection](#) (March/April 2014): “Clark’s debut young adult novel offers a thoughtful and compassionate reflection on sexuality and transgender issues. This emotional novel in verse is told through the perspectives of three different characters; each section is denoted by a different font style and tone. Brendan struggles with gender identity, at times wondering why his male body feels so unlike his true self. Angel, a confident transsexual working at a teen center, befriends Brendan. The remaining sections, narrated by Brendan’s girlfriend, Vanessa, describe their relationship. All three narrators cross traditionally defined gender boundaries, revealing layers of nuance in the gender identity conversation and challenging readers’ assumptions. While Clark’s introspective poetry will ring true for young people specifically struggling with gender identity, the story’s appeal can extend further. Many readers will be able to relate to Brendan’s challenge of discovering who he is and his anxiety that he will never have a place to truly call his own.”

- [Publishers Weekly](#) (16 Sept 2013. Starred review): “Debut novelist Clark uses free verse to write a gripping story about a complex topic: the challenges of growing up transgender or genderqueer. Brendan struggles with his occasional desires to be a girl; in her own series of poems, Brendan’s devoted girlfriend, Vanessa, worries about why he is suddenly avoiding her. Meanwhile, transgendered Angel—whom Brendan meets near the teen center where Angel works—reveals her own painful journey; her intense story includes physical abuse and a hospital stay after being beaten up while working as a prostitute. Clark doesn’t stray far from the central theme (the back matter includes resources and further reading) as she empathically explores what it can be like to be a transgendered teen (for example, not every transitioning character considers sex-reassignment surgery to be important). The author emphasizes that there are no simple answers for her characters, especially Brendan, who wonders if the transgendered label even fits. At the same time, through Angel, she gives her story a current of hope: “Everyone feels like a freak/ until they make up their mind/ they’re not.” Ages 12-up.
- [School Library Journal](#) (Oct. 2013): “Brandon, a high school wrestler, must face the fact that despite his best efforts he isn’t as hyper-masculine as he feels he needs to be. Acceptance of his gender fluidity will prove to be his greatest challenge. Brandon’s stepfather, a symphony conductor, appears to need regular validation of his manliness, and his mother undergoes breast enhancement surgery to appear, presumably, more womanly. Vanessa, Brandon’s girlfriend, is also a wrestler; she feels she can only have a true win on the mat once her opponent lets go of the thought that she’s a girl. When he’s not aggressive enough in the ring, Brandon’s coach calls him Brenda. Eventually, he meets Angel, an attractive young woman whose birth certificate reads “male.” Angel-empowered, self-loving, and equipped to help others-can support Brandon to be at home in his body and in his craving for feminine expression. This book is a strong addition to LGBT and general collections as a compelling story for reluctant readers and an educational piece on a topic that needs discussion. The use of typography for emphasis is occasionally awkward and self-conscious, but overall this novel-in-verse presents a clear, realistic narrative in various voices. It succeeds in conveying the message that “you are not alone” to transgender youth while helping everyone else get a handle on these often-tortured teens. The author succeeds in her mission to foster “greater understanding and acceptance of gender’s vast and lovely variation.”

### Lists

- [ALA Rainbow Project Book List](#), 2014
- [Bank Street Best Children’s Books of the Year, Category: Today](#), 2014
- [The Horn Book Recommended books on transgender lives](#), 2015