

# Parrotfish: A Parrot, a Fish, or Something in Between?

An Interview with Ellen Wittlinger and Toby Davis

(Note from the editors: In order to give Ellen Wittlinger's important book, *Parrotfish*, the attention it deserves, we have paired CJ Bott's interview with Ellen Wittlinger and Toby Davis with Elizabeth McNeil's analysis of the book and its place in young adult literature with transgender characters at the center. Dr. McNeil's analysis follows the interview.)

**T**olerance often follows personal experience or knowledge, and in today's world, there has not been much written about transgendered youth. In Ellen Wittlinger's recent YA novel, *Parrotfish*, she presents Grady, a transgendered female-to-male teenager who gently pulls us out of our ignorance. Part of Ellen's inspiration for this book was Toby Davis, who, though born female, is now living as a male.

**CJ:** Many authors take risks in their writing—some with structure, the safer risk—but you so often take the greater risk of content or subject matter, this time by telling the story of a transgender teen. What motivates you to take the greater and more important risk of introducing topics that many find too uncomfortable to write about?

**Ellen:** If it's uncomfortable to talk about, it's probably important to talk about. My last three books have dealt with oral sex among young teens [*Sandpiper*], spiritualism versus atheism [*Blind Faith*], and a

transgender teenager [*Parrotfish*]. Kids are thinking and talking about issues like this, and I want to be part of that conversation.

I've always been the kind of person who wants to know everybody's secrets because what's hidden underneath is what makes us unique and interesting, what makes us human. And when I'm beginning a book, I like to choose a topic that I know a little about but want to know *more* about. That keeps the writing interesting to me.

**CJ:** Did this story come to you or did you go out looking for it? How did you research it?

**Ellen:** Well, in a way the story *did* come to me. My husband and I had just moved to western Massachusetts near where our daughter Kate lives, and she introduced us to some of her friends, one of whom was Toby Davis. She had told me before I met him that Toby, though born female, was living as a male. I liked Toby as soon as I met him. He's just a little shy with a big, warm smile and a good sense of humor. And it turned out Toby knew who I was. He'd read *Hard Love* as a teenager and was excited to meet me.

Before long an idea began to percolate. Why not write a story about a transgender teenager and ask Toby if he'd help me make sure it was a *true* story? I was a little hesitant to ask, but I ran it by Kate. She was enthusiastic and passed the idea along to Toby, who was thrilled.

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Before I even spoke to Toby, though, I wanted to know what I was talking about, so I read several books, *Transgender Warriors*, by Leslie Feinberg, and *Gender Outlaw* by Kate Bornstein, among others, which helped me understand the difference between sexuality and gender. I wanted to know what the issues were. Then I emailed Toby a list of 30 questions, all of which he answered. And then we met for an afternoon of tea and truth-telling at a downtown café. There was no question that Toby

wouldn't answer at length. I think what amazed me most was that there was so much I didn't know about this subject. I think of myself as liberal, gay-friendly, and pretty up-to-date about what's going on in the world, but these things I didn't know.

I haven't written the story of Toby's life—that was never the intention. What I hope I have written is a story that gets it right about a transgender teen.

**Toby:** And that's why I love *Parrotfish* so much. Not just because Ellen is a great writer, or because she's created a character with such a great and honest FTM [female to male] voice. Here, for the first time, is a book with hope for its transgender character. Grady is not going to get killed, or even beat up. He's not lamenting how tragic it is to be transgender, he's just trying to live his life honestly and make sense of his wacky family. When I came out, there was no *Parrotfish* for someone to hand me. Now, thanks to Ellen, there is, and I feel incredibly blessed to have been part of that process.

**Ellen:** What Toby gave me was the *heart* of the book, the emotion, the soul. I couldn't have written it without him, and I wouldn't have tried. At least Toby loves it, and he's the audience I care about most.

**CJ:** There has only been one other YA book about a transgender teen, Julie Anne Peters's groundbreaking *Luna*. What do you hope to bring to the reader in *Parrotfish* that is different from *Luna*?

**Ellen:** Julie Anne Peters deserves a boatload of credit for blazing the trail in writing about transgender teens. My initial thought was just to write another book on that subject, because, after all, would we be satisfied with only one book on any other subject? Of course not—there should be a selection to choose from. There's more than one story to be told about transgender teenagers—they're certainly not all the same.

My book differs from Julie Anne's in several respects. First of all, it's written in the voice of Grady, the transgender teen himself, whereas *Luna* was narrated by the sister. Secondly, my protagonist is transitioning from female-to-male (FTM) whereas the opposite was true for Julie Anne's character. And finally, *Luna* paints a rather dark—and, unfortunately, often true—portrait of a transgender teen. In my novel, *Parrotfish*, Grady's coming out, while painful in certain respects, is also full of the humor of living with a big, rowdy family whose members basically love each other. Toby asked me for a positive ending, and I think the story earns one.

**CJ:** Grady's big crazy family—the ultimate Christmas fan of a dad, a bit of a controlling mom, a typical popularity-hungry younger sister, and a spacey younger brother, not to mention an aunt who has just had a baby thanks to a sperm bank donation—Grady almost looks like the stable one. And Christmas is a major theme in the book. Why did you pack so much into the story that takes place in only four or five weeks?

**Ellen:** I like to populate my protagonist's worlds as much as possible. I like to read books like that too, in which there are lots of people to keep track of—and I particularly love books that have big, crazy families in them. Probably because I *didn't* have one—I was an only child. For me, a book seems richer—and maybe more real—if there's a lot going on.

Also, in *Parrotfish* I wanted the reader to see

a variety of responses to Grady's transitioning. And I felt there had to be a baby present to remind us how immediately we want to identify a new person as "boy" or "girl." I wanted that baby there in the first chapter so we couldn't deny it—it's the first thing everybody asks when a baby is born.

And, yes, I do think Grady is the "stable" one—he's a pleasant, hard-working, easy-going kid who might otherwise blend into the background, except for that one thing, his discomfort with the gender into which he was born. Why is that one thing enough to send so many people into a tailspin?

About the Christmas theme: there was a family in the town where I grew up in Illinois that did something similar to this, and I always thought I'd use it in a book someday. They even turned their living area into a Victorian-themed stage and only entered wearing costumes.

The reason it's here is because of the aspect of being onstage, dressing up and becoming someone you're not, which, of course, Grady has been doing for sixteen years. When he finally appears in their annual "pageant" as a boy instead of a girl, it's the end of some things and the beginning of others. In fact, many of the characters are initially defined by their reactions to the over-the-top display and the work it takes to put it up every year.

**CJ:** It's amazing how you create all these pieces and then slide them together so smoothly. I do want to say that I love Sebastian! I have had a few students like him in my teaching career and have been very grateful for that. Thanks, Ellen, for another great character.

**Ellen:** I see Sebastian as a highly-evolved human being, the best that geek-dom has to offer. He seems to be straight, as evidenced by his interest in Eve, but he isn't a "man's man." He's happy to make dinner for his mother, and he goes out of his way to buy peppermint shampoo, for goodness sake! And he likes Grady as a female *or* a male—he responds to the person, and, with his scientific bent, also finds the questions of gender fascinating in themselves. (As they are.)

**CJ:** Toby, did you have a Sebastian in your world?

**Toby:** I had a couple of different Sebastian-type figures in my life. In high school, when I was still lesbian identified, I had a couple of guys who were my really close friends. When I came out to them as transgender my freshman year of college, one of them said to me, "You've always been one of the guys." Another one, my ex-boyfriend from a brief and rather platonic ninth-grade relationship, confessed to me that he thought I was hot when I was a girl, and still thought I was hot as a guy. That was a pretty awesome reaction. I was lucky enough to come out as transgender in an environment that was both educated and welcoming. I literally went down to dinner in my dorm one night and told everyone that I thought I might be transgender. No one was particularly fazed by it, and eventually a few of my friends from the dorm christened me "Toby," the name which remains mine to this day. However, I was most blessed in my best friend, who already had years of LGBT activism before starting college. When I confessed to her that I thought I might be transgender, she took me to a book shop downtown and handed me a copy of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, a book about growing up as a butch (masculine) woman in the 1950s gay and lesbian bar scene, and then later transitioning to male. That book changed my life, because for the first time I saw someone put into words what it feels like to want to be seen as male, when everyone is telling you that you're female. That book also depressed the heck out of me, because growing up gay, lesbian, or transgender in that time was lonely and incredibly dangerous.

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to Grady's announcement, and it seemed to me that, in this case, the women (mother, sister, best friend) might also have an underlying, probably subconscious, feeling of betrayal because Grady didn't want to be like them, even though that has nothing to do with his actions. He was "leaving" the female gender and joining the male, which didn't particularly bother his dad or brother who were comfortable with their own gender.

I don't think these reactions are necessarily typical. I imagine each family reacts in their own, complicated ways, but this was how I decided Grady's family would feel.

**Toby:** I think people feel threatened by other people's identities, especially gender identity. It's the whole idea of "if my friend is transgender, what does that make me?" If we have lived our whole life taking the categories of male and female for granted, and all of a sudden somebody tells us that those things aren't infallible, that can shake up everything. Especially for a teenager who is already struggling to figure out who he or she is and how to fit into

**CJ:** Most characters react to Grady's transitioning as though it has something to do with them, and that is their focus, rather than what it has to do with Grady. Is it because of their insecurities, their fear of change, or what? And how can that be dealt with?

**Ellen:** I think one of the first reactions people have to any kind of news about people close to them is, "What does this mean to me?" You could say this is selfish, or self-protective, to put a somewhat better spin on it. It's human.

Still, I didn't want everyone in his life to have a terrible reaction

the world. There are guidelines that tell us how we're supposed to act around guys as opposed to how we're supposed to act around girls. If someone comes along who doesn't fit into one of those categories neatly, the whole social map gets tossed out the window. Gender identity often raises the uncomfortable question of sexual orientation.

I agree with Ellen that the best way to combat all this fear is education. If people stop thinking of gender identity as somehow inherently linked to biology, as they become aware that male and female are not the only options, then being transgender will stop being so strange and threatening.

**CJ:** In reading *Parrotfish* and working with both of you, one of the things I have realized is how gender identity and sexual identity/orientation are not only different but are also not defined at the same time for any of us; my gender identity was defined years before my sexual orientation. And they might be redefined as life goes on. Could you define them again?

**Ellen:** Gender identity refers to who you feel like, whether a male, a female, or something in between. Sexual identity (or sexual orientation) refers to who you are attracted to, whether you're gay, straight or bisexual. These aren't linked.

**Toby:** Although I do like to raise the point that even biological sex isn't as set in stone as everyone thinks. It really shook my world up in a good way when I learned that the whole idea of two sexes and two genders is a social construct, not something inherently true and natural. This is important for me because it helped me stop feeling like a freak. I realized that it was just an imperfect system.

**CJ:** Would you explain the significance of the title, *Parrotfish*? Is it a parrot or a fish?

**Ellen:** A parrotfish is a real fish with colorings like a parrot that can change its gender from female to male. It was Toby's suggestion to find a natural metaphor for gender changing. I did some online research and found there were a number of fish and

other organisms that changed gender, but some of them had names like slime mold, which wasn't what I had in mind. Then I found the Parrotfish, not only a good name, but a good title and a beautiful fish too.

*Ellen Wittlinger is working on a book tentatively titled, The Only Boy on Bristow Street, and awaiting the release of Love & Lies: Marisol's Story, a companion novel to Hard Love.*

*Toby Davis is a 25-year-old playwright with a third of a YA novel up his sleeve.*

*CJ Bott is author of The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom, and can be reached through her website < www.bulliesinbooks.com >*

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## Ellen Wittlinger's *Parrotfish*: Normalizing Transgender in Young Adult Literature

Elizabeth McNeil

Transgender identity is as old as human consciousness, though suppressed in Western modernity until the end of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> As Michael Cart chronicles in his 2004 *ALAN Review* article, "What a Wonderful World: Notes on the Evolution of GLBTQ Literature for Young Adults," while a "new homosexual consciousness" emerged in adult literature and "the first stirrings" of YA literature following WWII (46), adult literary publications having to do with homosexuality, and YA literature having to do with any type of sexuality, were not published to any appreciable extent until the 1960s. In the '80s, as gay YA fiction was gaining ground, the "transgender" term was coined (Stryker 4), and adult transgender novels

started to become available a decade later<sup>2</sup>; but not until 2004 did a serious work of YA fiction feature a fully realized transgender character.<sup>3</sup>

Critics consistently cite just three YA novels to date whose authors have crafted "believable, multidimensional" transgender characters: *Luna* (2004), by Julie Anne Peters; *Choir Boy* (2005), Charlie Anders's debut novel; and Ellen Wittlinger's *Parrotfish* (2007) (Rockefeller 521).<sup>4</sup> In *Luna*, the narrator's older sibling, Liam, is becoming Luna; in *Choir Boy*, the third-person narrative's protagonist, Berry, begins transitioning from male to female so that his voice will not deepen; and in *Parrotfish*, the narrator is a high school sophomore who was Angela and is now Grady. The main characters in all three novels are white and middle class, and only Anders's deals with the issue of hormone therapy to inhibit puberty.<sup>5</sup> Although Anders's fantastical *Choir Boy* received a Lambda Literary Award in 2006, it has thus far not garnered the literary acclaim Peters's and Wittlinger's realistic novels have received.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that, in Peters's *Luna*, the mother surreptitiously supplies her post-pubescent son with hormones and the parents in Wittlinger's *Parrotfish* try to be accommodating, none of the parents in either novel is pro-actively supportive of her/his transitioning teen, and the father in *Luna* threatens violence when confronted with his son's femaleness. The inability of the parents to cope with their children's "gender dysphoria" leaves the teenagers to figure out strategies for transitioning on their own.

In *Luna*, the all-consuming process of supporting her brother's transition impedes the romantic and social coming of age of Regan, the novel's protagonist. Seeing Luna off at the airport in the novel's unsatisfying ending, Regan feels liberated from her lifelong role of sole confidante: "I walked, walked faster. Ran. Toward the door. The exit. The entrance. 'Good-bye, Liam.' I spoke the words aloud so their music filled my head: 'Hello, Regan'" (Peters 248). Though Regan has always been fully accepting of Luna's gendered reality, Peters deals with the basic unworkability of the gender transformation in the protagonist's life and the characters' particular family and community. However, Luna's destination, Seattle, is represented as a hopeful urban environment where she will reside with a friend who is living very successfully as a transgender woman.

While familial and communal integration is ultimately untenable in *Luna*, in *Parrotfish* Wittlinger insists on a fully situated transformation—for the protagonist, his family, his peers, and, ultimately, even for the larger community. Though this all-encompassing transformation could be read as somewhat too idealistically or glibly

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posited, the female to male (FTM) transition in *Parrotfish* is construed as less socially problematic than that of the male to female (MTF) transformation in *Luna*, and Grady's family and community more tolerant. As a result, the gender change in *Parrotfish* is slightly more easily negotiated.

Whereas Peters does not make an argument for the naturalness of gender

fluidity or sex reassignment, a major premise of Wittlinger's text is that very notion, taken from ichthyology. Interestingly, though perhaps too coincidentally, upon meeting his friend Sebastian for the first time, Grady proclaims his new gender identity, and Sebastian shares that he is doing a class research project on a gender-reassigning fish. The text thus goes on to educate both Grady and the reader:

"Are you listening to me?" Sebastian said. "The Smithsonian website says that in lots of fish, gender ambiguity is natural—especially in reef fish. . . . Isn't that awesome?"

He had my attention now. "What? Fish change from female to male?"

"That's what I'm telling you. . . . [A]ll parrotfish do. And the two-banded anemonefish can change either way. Slipper limpets can change back and forth, and so can hamlets and small-eyed goby and water fleas and slime mold —"

. . . I sighed. "It's just . . . I don't know what this has to do with me, Sebastian. I'm not a fish."

. . . "[B]ut I thought you'd like some real evidence here that you are not alone in the animal world. There are other living creatures that do this all the time. 'Nature creates many variations.' I'm using that line in my paper." (Wittlinger 70-71)

Depicting transgendered embodiment in non-human nature, and offering scientific evidence, is one way

that Wittlinger normalizes gender variance in *Parrotfish*, thus making her novel distinct from Peters's more problem-oriented text.

Also unlike Peters's *Luna*, which is not told through the perspective of the transgender youth, is that *Parrotfish* offers an interior portrait, showing how the protagonist himself deals with his transition. Grady, who knew "from the age of four or five" that he was a "typical, average, ordinary boy" (9, 19), had briefly identified as a lesbian ("just a pit stop on the queer and confused highway," Grady muses [18]—and a recognized pathway for some FTMs [Rubin 476]). He is now, during the month spanned in the novel, negotiating what he feels is his inherent heterosexual maleness. Though the problems Grady faces at home and school are more or less realistically portrayed, what predominates in the story is not tragic or violent upset but, rather, the protagonist's wit, humor, and maturity as he confronts and makes the best of each step of his coming out. He even interacts successfully with a girl upon whom he has a crush.

Grady's strength comes in part from his unconventional family. One parent is Jewish and the other Christian, though only Christmas is celebrated—in an overblown way—each year at their house, and his aunt has recently become a single parent through artificial insemination. His homeschooling up until high school is another factor that has permitted Grady to become an independent thinker. Determined now to "be myself, that's all," at whatever cost ("I couldn't go back to being a girl; even if somebody beat me up for doing this, I couldn't"), Grady's ability to negotiate what, for others, could be a series of paralyzing or demoralizing situations is enhanced by his humor and linguistic creativity (Wittlinger 22, 54). As in many coming-of-age novels, writing/language is a powerful tool for Wittlinger's protagonist. Besides being a well-informed and articulate conversationalist, Grady is a writer who constantly imagines funny, self-compassionate rejoinders and dialogs:

MRS. NORMAN: I suggest you take a yoga class, Angela. Rather than become a . . . [shivers] male. Learn to breathe deeply and stand up straight. Good posture is the key to mental health.

ME: I'm not mentally unhealthy, Mr. Norman. I'm just a boy. (46)

Grady's abilities permit him to work effectively on an artistic project with his new friend Sebastian that

becomes a literal point of re-vision for Grady, his family and friends, and the townsfolk. By writing a new script for the family's rendition of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Grady ends the annual decorating and acting extravaganza that has made their house a holiday focus for the town and defined December for the family, though all but the father now find the tradition oppressive. Grady's sense of authority regarding his own writerly ability and creative vision ultimately liberates his family members and friends to move on to what the novel promises will be a fulfilling new phase of their lives.

The acting trope also serves Wittlinger's ideological purposes. In the novel's final paragraph, Grady philosophizes, "Things change. People change. We spend a long time trying to figure out how to act like ourselves, and then, if we're lucky, we finally figure out that being ourselves has nothing to do with acting" (287). Literature can offer readers opportunities to explore unfamiliar realities, an especially intimate experience when that reality is embodied in the narrator, as Wittlinger has done with *Parrotfish*. Having "acted out" situations with the protagonist, we gain additional tools for enacting acceptance and negotiating change in the far more complex and emotionally charged real world.

Through educative aspects of the text, like the parrotfish exchanges and the resources listed at the end of the book, Wittlinger indicates that her novel is intended to inform as well as entertain. Gender identity affects us all, and ignorance regarding gender variance has led to terrible outcomes. In February 2008, 15-year-old Lawrence King, a well-liked, openly gay 8th-grader who had begun to come to school wearing makeup and feminine clothing, was fatally shot in the head during class by a peer, allegedly over Larry's gender expression. Of all hate crimes reported in 2006 (many obviously go unreported), 15.5% were linked to (perceived) sexual orientation (U.S. Justice). Anti-GLBT violence went up by 18% in 2006 (U.S. Justice), and 24% the following year (NCAVP). The problem, in other words, is only escalating. Perpetrators of the most violent of these crimes are male, which suggests that the social constructions of gender that are threatened by gender nonconformity need to be interrogated early in life. In an April 2007 blog posted after she had attended a reading by Wittlinger, Linda Braun notes:

Ellen . . . recounted stories of being uninvited from schools and libraries when the community learned that she was going to talk about titles with GLBTQ themes. A main point Ellen made was that we may think that the world has come very far in the acceptance of GLBTQ teens and adults[;] however, acceptance is not universal and it's important to recognize that fact and work to help to guarantee that materials with GLBTQ themes for teens are kept on library shelves.

Perhaps Larry King's life and the contribution he would have gone on to make to our society could have been preserved through adequate resources and education.

Though tragic stories like Larry's have, until now, garnered all the media attention (when they have received attention at all), February 2008 also saw a positive story in the reports of the accommodation of an MTF second-grader in a Colorado public school during the 2007-08 school year.<sup>7</sup> In addition to positive news stories, transgender associations and websites are now available for families, teens, and adults, and this year saw the publication of the first manual of care—Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper's *The Transgender Child* (2008).<sup>8</sup> In terms of fostering intellectual acumen and social consciousness, this landmark text and transgender YA literature urge us to consider the personal and communal consequences of our offering gender awareness education.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gender diversity (homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender, intersexuality, gender fluidity) is evident both in nature and in cultural artifacts and historical practices globally. In terms of the latter, see Leslie Feinberg's influential *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (New York: World View Forum, 1992) and *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon P, 1996).
- <sup>2</sup> Publication of GLBTQ scholarship and literature increased dramatically in the 1990s. The Lambda Foundation's Literary Awards began to include a transgender category in 1996 (see [http://www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/previous\\_winners/paw\\_1996\\_1999.html](http://www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/previous_winners/paw_1996_1999.html)).
- <sup>3</sup> Though David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (New York and Toronto: Knopf, 2003) and James St. James's *Freak Show* (New York: Penguin Group, 2007) include drag queen characters, these texts have been categorized as gay YA literature, although one reviewer contends St. James's protagonist is "probably transgender" ("The Hidden Side of a Leaf," 2007, 26 May 2008, <http://cc.msnsnscache.com/>

[cache.aspx?q=73428738053790&mkt=en-US&lang=en-US&w=cb8fd586,ff5ca6e6&FORM=CVRE3](http://cc.msnsnscache.com/cache.aspx?q=73428738053790&mkt=en-US&lang=en-US&w=cb8fd586,ff5ca6e6&FORM=CVRE3)).

- <sup>4</sup> Rockefeller divides what he calls "transgender-inclusive" YA literature into four categories: (1) stories that feature "characters who are consistently identified as the opposite gender but do not identify as transgender themselves"; (2) fiction that "present[s] and perpetuate[s] negative stereotypes"; (3) narratives that present "the option of passing as a different gender as a quick fix to a problem," which he says is "by far the most populous" category; and (4) "those few—very few—novels that craft believable, multidimensional characters who embody or face transgender themes in a plausible way" (520-21).
- <sup>5</sup> Regarding pre-pubescent hormone therapy, see Brill and Pepper.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, teenreads.com reviewed *Luna* and *Parrotfish*, but not *Choir Boy*. *Luna* was named an ALA Stonewall Honor Book and ALA Best Book for Young Adults in 2005, and won or was a finalist for many other awards. Thus far, *Parrotfish* was a finalist for the 2008 Stonewall Book Awards, was nominated for several other awards, and is included on notable booklists. *The Advocate* chose both *Parrotfish* and *Choir Boy* for its 2008 Top Picks for Trans YA Fiction list, so perhaps the latter text, because it is a first novel, is just off to a slower start.
- <sup>7</sup> Also see a recent two-part NPR report by Alix Spiegel, "Two Families Grapple with Sons' Gender Preferences: Psychologists Take Radically Different Approaches in Therapy," 7 May 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90247842>, and "Parents Consider Treatment to Delay Son's Puberty: New Therapy Would Buy Time to Resolve Gender Crisis," 8 May 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90273278>.
- <sup>8</sup> Films are also of value. Transgender youth experience is depicted in the award-winning Franco-Belgian-UK film *Ma vie en rose* (My Life in Pink) (1997) (its R rating in the U.S. has been opposed as transphobic). Teen transgender experience is presented in the independent documentary *Creature* (1999), and internet venues like YouTube house videos produced by transgender teens themselves.