

ALEX AS WELL

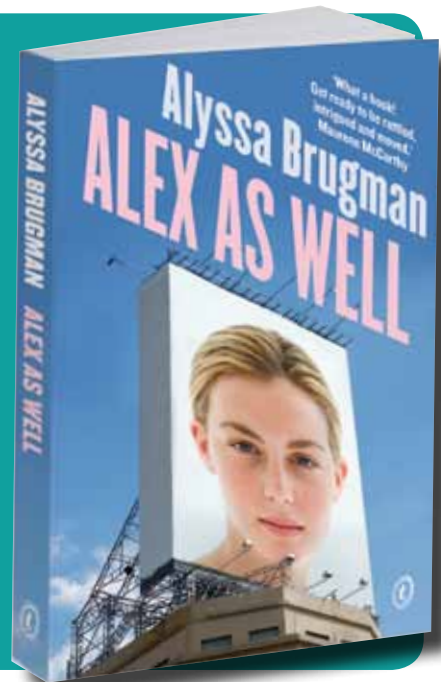
Alyssa Brugman

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Recommended for Middle Secondary



Resource Kit Contains

- Synopsis
- Author information
- Background discussion, discussion questions
- Thematic discussion questions: Gender and Identity, Adolescents, Family
- Closer Reading, Debating Topics, Writing Activities
Essay Topics and Further Reading



Praise

'Brugman's beautiful writing offers a startlingly accurate portrayal of teenage life and is a remarkable exploration of gender and sexuality. In typical Brugman, *Alex as Well* tackles its subject matter with fearless honesty as well as with strong insight and a delightful sense of humour... Readers of authors such as John Green will devour this novel.' 4 stars. *Junior Bookseller & Publisher*

Synopsis

As a teenager, Alex is facing all the usual dilemmas. Who does she like? What does she look like? Where does she fit in? Starting a new school and trying to reinvent who you are is never easy. However, Alex's secret could have a far greater impact on her life than just choosing the wrong outfit or having no friends.

When we first meet Alex, she is shadowed by another Alex, a boy. Two teenagers with so much in common but who do not always see eye to eye. Alex has spent the first fourteen years of her life as a boy. Born with gender dysphoria, her parents made a difficult decision when she was a baby and chose her gender, but while her parents decided that physically Alex was a boy, Alex has always felt more like a girl.

Partly narrated by the female Alex, the reader follows her journey from discovering her parents' secret choice to taking a stand and beginning a new life as the person she always felt she should have been. Alex launches into an emotional and difficult journey to live life the way she wants, as a girl. The emotion is also reflected through the voice of Alex's mother, Heather, who records events from her own perspective via an online blog.

Changing schools in order to live as a girl, Alex discovers new friends, new talents and what it means to simply be yourself. In seeking the legal support of Crockett, she

also discovers that some decisions made out of love are not always right. Her search for identity leads her to a fight for independence as her world begins to crumble. As Alex strengthens in her resolve, we see her mother's strength diminish to breaking point.

A challenging story about moral dilemmas, it is one that will give readers a new perspective on how they view gender and the sacrifices that are made when you choose to follow your heart. It raises questions related to gender stereotypes, family bonds and self belief.

About the Author

Alyssa Brugman was born in Rathmines in New South Wales in 1974. She has written several books for young adults including *Finding Grace*, which was shortlisted for the Printz Award, and *Walking Naked*, which was a CBCA honour book. She lives in the Hunter Valley with her partner and their children.

ACTIVITIES

Background

What is gender dysphoria and what laws exist to protect a child's right? Do some research. Discuss your findings with the class.

Should your parents have the right to make all of your decisions for you? Consider having a class debate on this topic.

Useful links

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-05-21/teen-cross-gender-clinic-calls-for-more-services/4024426>

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/allinthemind/born-this-way---gender-identity/4353904>

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/healthreport/gender-dysphoria/3472384#transcript>
<http://abcnews.go.com/2020/Story?id=3088298&page=1>
<http://www.transkidspurplerrainbow.org/>
<http://www.truecolours.org.au/index.html>

Discussion

1. Make a list of the people Alex comes in contact with and rank them depending on their relationship with Alex from closest to least close. Then re-rank them according to how supportive they are of her. Discuss why the lists may be similar or different. Is it what you expected?

Choose one of the characters and explain why they may feel the way they do. Find evidence from the novel.

2. Choose 10 quotes from the novel that best sum up how Alex feels. Use these quotes to form the foundations for a plea Alex might put to Crockett in seeking his help.

3. The novel is written from two different perspectives – Alex and her mother. In what way does this add to our understanding?

4. Discuss the way that Alex's internal voice and external voice are different. What is the effect on the reader?

5. "There are moments in life where something happens and it changes everything forever. You make one decision, and after that you can't go back." P. 1 Is Alex correct in her assumption that there is no going back?

6. Consider the interactions between Heather and her blog followers. What views do you think each of them holds? How do you know this?

7. What is your view of the people who respond to Heather's blog? Are your views constant? Which of these people do you agree with the most and why?

8. Look closely at each of Heather's blog posts. What evidence is there that she is not coping?

9. An interesting dilemma in writing about this novel is whether we should refer to Alex as he or she. What do you think? Justify your answer. Does it really matter?

10. Does *Alex as Well* offer us a 'happy ending'?

Themes

Gender and Identity

1. While Alex identifies with her female self in the novel, it is clear that the male Alex still plays a significant part in her life. What is it that makes us male or female?

2. "I'm walking up the street towards my house. Alex and I. Is it ok with you if we keep us separate? It makes more sense." P.21 Do you think it is possible for the male and female Alex to be two separate people?

3. In a group, make a list of characteristics and decide whether they are masculine or feminine traits. Be prepared to explain your choices. Then switch the list headings and consider whether those traits you see as feminine could also apply to a masculine image. Are there some traits that are more difficult to define than others?

4. Alex's parents are forced to make a difficult decision based on physical traits. Alex bases her choice on how she feels. Consider how Alex describes how it feels to be female in a male body when she meets with Crockett. In what way have gender stereotypes been challenged in recent years?

5. What suggestions are there that Alex is caught between two identities?

Adolescents

1. A great deal of what Alex goes through is not specific to someone going through identity conflict because of gender. Many of her issues go hand in hand with being a teenager. Her conflict with her parents is referred to by followers of Heather's blog as typical teenager rebellion. They advise her to set boundaries and ride out the emotional roller coaster of teen years. Which issues that Alex deals with do you think most teenagers relate to?

2. Alex's insecurities about herself may be heightened by her difference but she is aware also that she is a lot like other teenager girls when she befriends the girls at her new school. Using a mind map, consider the links between Alex and her friends. What does she learn about herself from each and in what way does this help her feel normal and make her feel different?

3. It is not necessary to be struggling with a gender issue to understand and relate to Alex. What lessons do we learn from her?

4. What advice would you offer your peers about riding out the turbulent teenage years? Write a brochure or create a website for young people.

5. Alex has a facebook page, in fact she has two. One for old Alex and one for the new Alex. Create these facebook pages (not real ones, just make it look like a facebook page).

Family

1. It is difficult to empathise with Alex's parents at times. Make a list of the moments in the novel where you found them particularly difficult to empathise with. Choose one of those moments for each character and consider the following questions.

- What was happening in the character's life at that moment?
- What might the character have been thinking at the moment?



- What frightened them most at that moment?
2. Alex makes the decision to divorce her parents and seek independence. It is not an easy option. Do you believe that Alex made the right decision? Did she have other options? Is it all right, in your view, to divorce yourself from your family?
 3. Consider the other families represented in the novel. Are they perfect or flawed in their own ways? Make a list of the positive and negative aspects of each family.
 4. Alex is not entirely blameless in the break down of her family. Do you agree?
 5. "We're good at pretending stuff wasn't said. We do that all the time. But I'm still a girl." P.30 In what way does denial contribute to the divide in the family's relationship?

Closer Reading

Read the following passages and answer the questions

Passage 1

Pages 13–14: "Alex and I are waiting in the office of waL noissecuS ,slliW ,gnicnayevnoC – sroticiloS llesraC dna ttekorC..."

And that's why my dad left us.

Me."

- What unusual writing techniques does Brugman use in this passage to engage the reader?
- What new information is revealed in this passage that addresses some of the questions that have been left unanswered until now?
- Consider why Alex might consider herself an "unsavoury".

Passage 2

Pages 108–111: "I'm frightened, I tell Alex...Everybody lets you down eventually."

- What is the effect of internal voice in this passage?
- What do we understand about the differences between the male and female Alex in this passage?
- What are your feelings about Ty in this passage and why?
- Do you believe that Alex's judgment at the end that "everybody lets you down eventually" is an accurate one in this novel?

Debating topics

- That gender stereotypes are a myth.
- That parents are always the best people to make decisions for their children.
- That how you feel is more important than how you look.
- That we should no longer see the humanity as male and female.
- That young people have no rights.

- That gender is a choice.

Writing activities

1. Alex has found his mother's blog online and decides to reply to one of her posts. Write that response.
2. If you were Alex's parents, what decision would you have made when he was a baby and how would you justify it?
3. It is 10 years later. Imagine a meeting between Alex and her parents. What would they say to each other? How might some views have changed? What might still be the same?
4. Create a book trailer for *Alex As Well*.
5. Write about a time when you felt so strongly about an issue that you went against your parents wishes.
6. Put yourself in Ty's shoes after Alex has told you her secret. What was the reason for telling others and has your view of Alex changed?

Essay topics

1. Alex takes a far more mature approach to her challenges than the adults in her life. Do you agree?
2. Discuss the way that our views of characters change throughout the novel.
3. There are no right or wrong perspectives in *Alex As Well*. All of the characters are victims of something outside their control. Do you agree?
4. In what way do the multiple perspectives in the text help readers to understand the family's dilemma?
5. Alex's mother thinks she is ruining her life. Her father can't even stand being around. Are Alex's parent bad parents?
6. Alex's struggles are no different from other teenagers. Do you agree?
7. While you can change who you are on the outside, it is impossible to alter the person on the inside. Do you agree?
8. It is more important to be yourself than to be what others want you to be. Discuss
9. Heather refers to Alex's condition as a 'disability'. Is she correct?

Further reading

Becoming Alec by Darwin Ward

Luna by Julie Anne Peters

Parrotfish by Ellen Wittlinger