

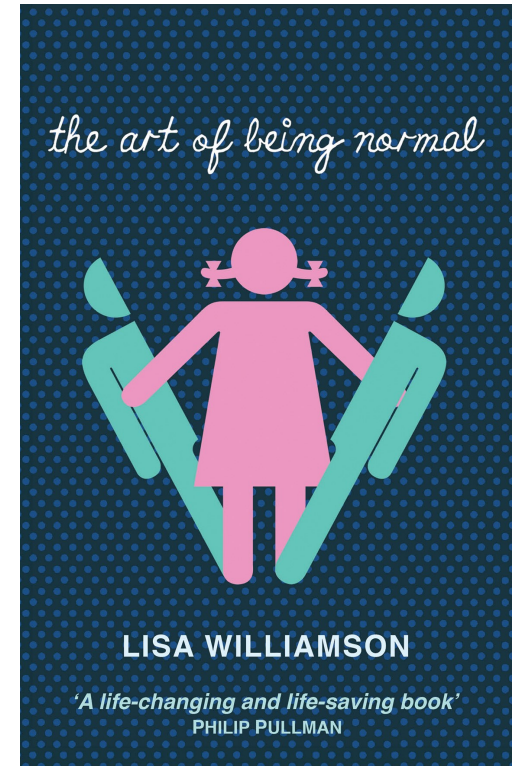
THE ART OF BEING NORMAL

LISA WILLIAMSON

Fourteen-year-old David has known he's wanted to be a girl from when he was a small child. While he has told his two best friends, he can't quite bring himself to tell his parents, even though he has a letter ready. They have their suspicions and think he's gay. The school bully thinks he's a freak.

Leo Denton, the new kid at Eden Park School, wants to be left alone. And the rumour mill helps keep him an outsider. But then when Leo stands up for David, everyone's a little more intrigued about the student from the wrong side of town. Especially Leo. An unlikely friendship is formed, and things get complicated when secrets are exposed in the school halls.

About the author: Lisa Williamson was born in Nottingham in 1980 and likes to write for young adults because she still feels like she is one. She attended Middlesex University to study Performing Arts, after which she did all sorts of daft acting jobs, from appearing in panto with Basil Brush, to playing a Witch in **Macbeth: The Musical**. In her late twenties, she found herself craving an additional creative outlet and started to write a novel about an out of work actor.



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Chrysoula Aiello

Between 2010 and 2012, Lisa worked as an administrator at the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS), based at the world-famous Tavistock Centre in North London. GIDS is the NHS service for under-eighteens struggling with their gender identity. The young people who used the service inspired her to write a story from the point of view of a transgender teenager. This eventually became **The Art of Being Normal**.

STUDY NOTES

- Reread the first part of David's narrative (pp 1-12). Consider the effect of David's wish and discuss how the following pages help the reader feel that David is an outsider. Do you think the effect would be different if we didn't know that David wants to be a girl from the beginning?
- Consider the title of the novel. Discuss some of the perceived senses of 'normal' (and identify the archetypes) that exist in the novel's world. Are they similar to, or differ, from what is perceived as normal in our society?
- How do you think ideas of 'normal', the status quo, are shaped and persist? Discuss the role of government, advertising and media in promoting and/or subverting these 'normal' cultures and images.
- How can the term 'normal' be dangerous? Identify the various characters and situations in **The Art of Being Normal** that defy the perceived sense of what is normal.



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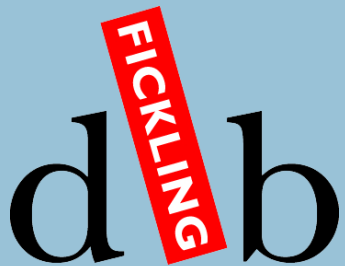


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- Eden Park School has its own rules and cliques. Why do you think it's common for schools to have rules and social hierarchies? Can you think of other texts (in film, television or books) that have positive and negative examples of school cliques (eg **Mean Girls**, the **Harry Potter** series, **Buffy the Vampire Slayer**, **Easy A**)?
- Did you suspect that Leo might have a big secret before he reveals the truth to Alicia? How does the author build tension/suspense before the revelation?
- Do you think it's common for people to want to keep the ways their identity doesn't quite satisfy the 'norm' a secret? Why? Do you think that Leo's 'social isolation' is a healthy way to cope?
- Discuss the terms transgender and cisgender with the class. How do David and Leo respond differently to the gender expectations mainstream cisgender society places on them?
- Identify the music references in the novel (eg 'Hakuna Matata', Ella Fitzgerald, Lady Gaga). How does each reference reflect and/or comment on the action of the novel? Do you think a musical soundtrack in a novel can be an effective device?
- 'Don't judge a book by its cover' is a common idiom. In which instances in the novel do we learn the significance of not judging something by its face value? Do you think it's easy to follow this advice? Why or why not?
- 'The world isn't kind to people like me.' Discuss the February incident. Why do you think the Cloverdale students acted so violently? Do you think Cloverdale School reacted appropriately? How might the administrators at the school have helped to ameliorate the situation?

- 'But that's the story of my life. Everything I want turns to crap, I should have learnt that by now.' (p 297) How is reality often different from the fantasies/expectations of the characters in the novel?
- Consider asking students to find examples in fictional and media texts that subvert mainstream society's idea of normal. Ask them to write a twitter post about their example that includes the hashtag #whatisnormal.



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