

Liam Whalen

“New Dress,” Fiction Reading

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Identity is not a nebulous creation formed in a vacuum. Every experience we have as a human impacts the development of who we are. The way we are spoken to by our family and friends encourages the activities we participate in. This book-length work of fiction explores themes of gender and sexuality in the formation of public and private identity.

The structure of *New Dress* is fractured into different timelines from the early past, recent past and present. These pieces come together and form a collage that builds the identity of the story’s subject, Jamie. Jamie’s life is made of moments that have influenced their ideas about gender and sexuality. The sections move between the different relationships Jamie has with their parents and friends, detailing small ways in which people suggest versions of what is normal. Expectations play a part in how people are raised and these forces can change the way children and adolescents think about the world. Body image and concern with physical appearance is learned and enforced by social stigmas that select and exclude what is deemed to be ugly or unacceptable. These expectations lead to repressing how we truly see ourselves; we are afraid of how the world will respond.

*New Dress* tackles the question of what it means to be out as genderqueer. Can a person come out publicly, and can they be accepted for how they see themselves? When a person comes out, will others see them as a failed image of what they are expected to be?