

# A Brief and Recent History of the Author

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## Once a Teacher...

Before I knew anything else about myself, I knew I was a teacher.

When I give talks about my experience as an openly transgender educator, this is always how I start. A lot of teachers understand this feeling I think – of knowing practically out of the womb that there was something pulling them into the classroom. My knowing settled in my heart when I was right on the edge of leaving high school. As an incoming senior, I didn't have solid college plans yet, but I knew how I liked to spend my time. I was a reader and a storyteller, scribbling fiction in the margins of my SAT prep book and leaving homework uncompleted so I could demolish another YA paperback before bed. I didn't love school, but I did love English, and even though I was unreliable with assignments and exams, I was lucky to have a series of teachers who recognized and nurtured the fire I was carrying around with me.

But 12th grade was different. Where before I'd had teachers who saw me and made room for my differences, Mr. Willis<sup>i</sup> did not. He belittled my weird interpretations of classic poems, scolded me in front of my peers when I forgot my homework, and looked right through

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<sup>i</sup>Name has been changed to a different person I don't like.

me when I raised my hand during class discussions. Suddenly, I didn't like English anymore. I stopped completing assignments that otherwise would have ignited me. I came into class late after lunch with bags of fast food. I stopped raising my hand.

One day, I realized that I was letting a single person ruin the only thing I loved, and that was when I started to really get how powerful a teacher could be.

A lot of teachers have a story about the "one teacher" who inspired them to get into the profession, who taught them just how influential and motivating the right adult presence can really be. I have that story too, but for slightly different reasons.

I got my shit together and got into college, studied hard, and worked as a writing tutor as I ran summer composition workshops. Once I got my credential, I was hired at the very first school to give me an interview. I came in early and left late every day for more than 10 years. I was convinced, top to bottom, that I would retire at 65 out of the same room I walked into at 21.

But that's not what happened.

What happened next is why I'm sitting here, writing this book, instead of unit mapping *Frankenstein* and scoring midterms.

More than a decade into my career and my very heterosexual marriage, I realized, quite out of nowhere, that I was probably trans.

Teachers do this a lot too – we forget to develop and explore our own identities, because we're always busy nurturing someone else's. There's no time for wondering who you are, what you like, and what you want, because it's a lot safer and easier to put a denim jacket on over a sundress and hold emotional space for teenagers. Yes, we self-abandon in the service of others, but also because it is exceptionally frightening to center and ask questions about ourselves.

I'm going to get through this next part quickly, because it still makes me very sad, and I'm making a concentrated effort not to spend too much time centering on trans pain in this book. There are a lot of books that do that – they make the whole of a trans person's story into a

tragedy and turn a spotlight onto our misery. I understand why. Our pain is novel and interesting, and it is easier to empathize with someone when you can share a smidge of their suffering, but it also feels like we aren't worth listening to unless we're in pain. There are a lot of organizations who don't want me to speak on their panels or at their events unless I'm willing to relive that pain. I'm not interested in that.

So here we go.

In my time at my school after discovering that I was queer, quite a few things happened:

- I became the advisor for the queer student group on campus.
- I helped curate and develop a LGBTQ+ library in my classroom with children's books, books for parents, books with queer characters, fantasy books, science fiction books, books in four different languages, comic books, coloring books, and books about understanding queer history, identity, and culture.
- I started making videos about my gender transition and putting them on the Internet.

Someone who isn't a transgender teacher living and working in a conservative corner of the country might not understand that last one, but it's the part of this journey that I regret the least. I've never experienced extreme isolation like what I felt as the sole openly trans educator in my district of almost 50,000 students. I wanted to know who else was feeling what I was feeling. There were more of us than I thought.

As my audience grew, so did my precautions. I only filmed when I wasn't working. If I was ever in my classroom, there was nothing behind me that could identify my school. I didn't speak poorly of my community or my administrators or my students. In class, I kept talk about my own life to a minimum. I advocated for students, but my curriculum stayed in lock step with my colleagues. As a teachers' union representative, I knew how even a toe out of line could end a teacher's career if they were already a visible target.

It didn't matter.

Parents, but never of my own students, started bringing complaints to district higher-ups faster than I could respond to them. I shouldn't be on social media, they said. It was inappropriate for me to "share my pronouns" on the first day of school, they argued. The complaints were dismissed as quickly as they appeared, but it was only a matter of time for something to find footing.

Ultimately, it was the books that did it.

My classroom was one of the inaugural education spaces targeted by the first wave of twenty-first century "book banning." Someone from the community forwarded a list of titles in my library to a far-right entertainment news network. In the list of almost 300 books, they found two<sup>ii</sup> with material they opposed. So, one morning, I woke up to an article on the front page of one of the most visited websites in the conservative world that spelled out my deadname,<sup>iii</sup> where I worked, and allegations about my intentions with children that are too depraved and horrifying to repeat here.

In the months that followed, the harassment I faced at school ballooned to a level that became unsustainable. After a bomb threat, countless phone calls, three district email addresses flooded with hate, parent and community-organized protests and social media doxing, and one snail-mailed handwritten all-caps letter all the way from Kentucky, I was done.

I handed in my resignation two years after I came out as trans and left classroom teaching for good.

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## The Letters After Our Names

Books like this don't usually have detailed author biographies right out of the gate. In my time reading professional development literature, they're usually drafted by people with a series of very impressive letters after their name, but who these people actually are is a mystery outside

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<sup>ii</sup>The books were *Juliet Takes a Breath* and *This Book Is Gay*.

<sup>iii</sup>If you missed the glossary, this refers to the name a trans person is given at birth that they no longer use. It is dangerous and unkind to share a trans person's deadname without their permission, as it opens them up to the potential for anti-trans harassment and violence.

of a short bullet-pointed list of where they earned the extra letters. That's not what's going to happen here. In this book, I'm going to spend a lot of time reiterating what we hear about marginalized experiences all the time: listen to the people who have lived them.

We can't argue that "representation is important" and then indulge in some weird "death of the author" when we're learning about these experiences for ourselves. That's bananas. What follows in these pages are ideas and advice that come from hard-won lived experience in the classroom and as a trans person navigating a startlingly unfriendly world, and there is no way to separate this knowledge and perspective from the person who survived it. There is no post-secondary program, no doctoral thesis, that will hand someone a more ironclad ethos here.

And transparently, we put a ton of stock into institutional knowledge, but those institutions work *really* hard to keep us out. I'm one of an estimated 7% of transgender people who have a degree higher than a bachelor's,<sup>1</sup> which is about half the national average. There is no data on the number of trans people with PhDs, but it's likely to be vanishingly small. Even if trans people were as equally represented among doctorate holders as they are in the general population, that would amount to less than 1% of the 2% of Americans who hold that distinction.

Even a number that high is unlikely, as trans people are much more likely to suffer the kinds of economic, emotional, and social distress that keep us far, far away from the kind of financial stability necessary to make it that far.

Really, for many of us, traditional markers of academic and professional success can suck an egg. We have, historically, been left out to dry by the same institutions that we are now expected to use to legitimize our voices. For example, in medicine and social work, up until 1973, the DSM<sup>iv</sup> classified homosexuality as a mental illness,<sup>2</sup> and it wasn't until

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<sup>iv</sup>The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association. It is currently in its fifth edition and is the most common centralized diagnostic tool used by health professionals in the United States.

2013 that they reclassified us trans people away from what they long called “gender identity disorder.”<sup>3</sup>

So yeah, we’re good.

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## Who Is Worth Listening To

When I was in your position, reading a book like this to see if there was anything I could realistically use in my classroom, there was only one part of someone’s biography that ever mattered to me: how long had they been in the classroom?

Because unless someone had really put in the hours, spending year after year attempting and failing and retrying and tweaking their own pedagogy, I wasn’t interested. Too many authors, too many trainers, and too many administrators had spent a year or two with their toes dipped in and believed with their whole chest that they had something to offer to me.

Come back when you’re so burned out and beaten down that you try to unlock your car with your classroom keys, please and thank you.

My trauma as a trans person may have made headlines and earned me a platform, but the entirety of my life made me a teacher and built the confidence and credibility I’m cashing in now.

I spent the entirety of my adult life giving everything to my school and my students. In this book, I will tell you everything I can about how to build an environment where students with identities like mine can survive and grow, but being trans is not the beginning and end of my own story. I wasn’t just a “trans teacher.”

Before that was the box built around me...

I coached our academic decathlon for 5 years and watched underestimated students take home trophies the school had never earned before.

I built an international curriculum for a film history class from scratch, during a pandemic, and piloted it from my living room.

I chaperoned every single school dance, holding cheap plastic breathalyzers up for hundreds of teenagers and swaying on the edge of the dance floor with a paper plate stacked high with Costco cookies.

I pretended that I had grading to do and stayed late with students whose parents forgot to pick them up at the end of the day.

I stood on the 50-yard line at football games with the other teachers (and left before the last kick to beat the traffic home).

I took buses of students to museums to hear about the Holocaust, to colleges to hear once-in-a-lifetime speakers, to New York to see Broadway musicals. I collected permission slips and bus money. I drove a van full of hungry teenagers to a CVS in the middle of the night, hundreds of miles from home, and turned the windshield wipers on when one of them wouldn't climb down off the hood to go back to the hotel.

I had teacher friends. We played Dungeons and Dragons on the weekend and had a tradition after graduation every year where we wore matching paper crowns and ate with our hands at Medieval Times.

I wasn't just a teacher. I was a *teacher*.

I don't know if you will trust me, but I know I would trust me. I think that's enough.

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## Notes

1. Durso, Laura E., Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, Jody L. Herman and Sandy E. James. "Early Insights: A Report of the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey." National Center for Transgender Equality, February 2024. [https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/2022%20USTS%20Early%20Insights%20Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/2022%20USTS%20Early%20Insights%20Report_FINAL.pdf)
2. Francine Russo, "Where Transgender Is No Longer a Diagnosis," *Scientific American*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/where-transgender-is-no-longer-a-diagnosis/>
3. "Gender Dysphoria Diagnosis," A Guide for Working With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Patients, American Psychiatric Association, 2024. <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/diversity/education/transgender-and-gender-nonconforming-patients/gender-dysphoria-diagnosis#:~:text=With%20the%20publication%20of%20DSM%E2%80%935%20in%202013%2C%20%E2%80%9Cgender,%2C%20medical%2C%20and%20surgical%20treatments>

