

## **Discussion Guide**

Transparent

Love, Family, and Living the T with Transgender Teenagers

Cris Beam

“A remarkable book—captivating, powerful, funny, and wise. Without ever upstaging her subjects, Beam explains how she fell in love with them, and so allows us to do the same. This is literature of the first order.”—Andrew Solomon, author of *The Noonday Demon*

### **About This Guide**

Cris Beam’s *Transparent* explores many facets of human experience, encompassing not only gender identities but also relationships, the road from adolescence to adulthood, and the hunger to be nurtured. This discussion guide is designed for use in a variety of settings, whether you are a counselor, teacher, parent, teen, support-group member, or simply a dedicated reader who wants to exchange ideas with others who have read the book. We hope the following questions and activities will enrich your experience of this inspiring memoir.

### **Introduction to the Book**

When Cris Beam first contacted the Eagles program, a school for gay and transgender teenagers in Los Angeles, she simply wanted to volunteer for a few hours. She didn’t know that most Eagles volunteers lasted just a few weeks or a few months; she stayed to teach journalism there for two and a half years. She also didn’t know that Eagles would lead her to become more than a teacher: She would also become a lifeline, an advocate, and eventually a foster parent.

In *Transparent*, Beam introduces us to Christina, Domineque, Foxxjazell, and Ariel, transgirls who were born genetically “male” but who know themselves as unmistakably female in their souls, minds, and core identities. As we enter the world of these four teenagers, we encounter all of the familiar elements of adolescence—cliques, crushes, rebellion, and powerful friendships. But, because these girls are rejected by parents, traditional-school students, or society in general, their world also comprises the elements of a gritty life on the streets: the sex trade, drug trafficking, gangs, and the nightmarish bureaucracy of shelters and foster homes. By turns heartbreaking and exhilarating, the scenes in *Transparent* capture the essence of these unforgettable youths, who spin, sabotage, and continuously reinvent dreams for their futures.

In telling the girls’ stories, Beam delivers riveting reporting and a tender memoir. Though she discusses current medical and psychological research, she does not attempt to create a comprehensive study or clinical analysis of all transgender populations. Instead, she tells us about a particular community, one that caused her to confront even her own misconceptions. The work she undertakes at Eagles also leads her to face the memory of her mother, who abandoned her at a crucial time in her life.

This is a book that may reinforce or dispel your notions about gender. It may cause you to rethink your definitions of family. It may open your eyes to the often misunderstood world of homeless teens. One thing is certain: It will spark meaningful conversation about the ways we as a society can ease despair and celebrate the power of individuality and the courage it takes to be one's self..

### **A. Identity**

1. In the chapter titled "School," Cris Beam outlines the difference between being transgender and being transsexual. Were you familiar with this distinction before reading the book? What are the benefits and limitations of these categories?

2. In "Arriving," Beam describes her attempts to decipher the informal labels she overhears while teaching at New York's Harvey Milk School, such as "aggressives" and "femme queens." The students resist her question about whether a person can be a blend of several types of people and simply label her old. Is the urge to categorize ourselves and others an adolescent impulse, with rules about who can interact with whom? What are the boundaries of your identity? Who created these boundaries?

3. Beam has to become familiar with the code words of Christina's community (getting "clocked," for example) and observes how much the terminology can vary between the East Coast and the West Coast. To what extent does vocabulary shape identity? What are the languages of your subculture—the neighborhood where you grew up, or your profession?

4. Talk about your definitions of the words *feminine* and *masculine*. Make a list of any traits that come to mind, exploring how these traits manifest themselves in terms of physical appearance, job choices, personality, and other categories. How do these traits manifest themselves in you? To what extent did you adopt these traits innately, and to what extent were you following a role model? Which of these characteristics do you find attractive in others? Which of these characteristics do you think are most valued by society?

5. *Transparent* describes Native American tribes that valued transsexuality. Why is American society suspicious of transsexual and transgender populations, to the extent that even some gay and lesbian groups prefer to reject them rather than seek solidarity with them in fighting marginalization? Who (or what) has the power to define the margins of the mainstream?

6. Ariel wrestles with the conflict between her Christianity and her gender identity. What should the role of religion be in such questions of identity? Have your experiences with spirituality enhanced or inhibited the growth of your true self?

### **B. Family**

1. Discuss the notion of parenting expressed in the title *Transparent*, beyond the wordplay of Beam's parenting a transgender teen. What is "transparent" about their

relationship, both as mother and daughter and as friends? What aspects were less transparent, requiring years of honest communication to decipher?

2. How have you defined family throughout your life? Who have your best “parents” been? Did you have the equivalent of a drag mother, someone you were not related to but who represented your ideal and gave you entry into an otherwise closed community?

3. What fundamentals are essential for strong families? What behaviors can dissolve a family? What are the strengths and weaknesses in Gloria’s approach to parenting?

4. Is gender a factor in a parent’s qualifications? Did Christina particularly need a female parent team, which Beam and her partner, Robin, were?

5. Is good parenting instinctive? Is Beam a good mother because she has innate maternal instincts, or because her own mother’s negligence made her empathetic? Or both?

6. Is drug addiction the reason Andrea and Domineque’s relationship couldn’t be sustained, or were drugs a symptom of a larger problem for Domineque?

### **C. Survival**

1. The chapter “Body” describes the standards of care established by Harry Benjamin. What crucial aspects of care (emotional or physical) did Beam discover that aren’t covered in medical texts?

2. Most of the girls in *Transparent* endure abusive relationships; in “Skidmarks,” Christina even prefers Loco to Francisco. How do these young women view the relationship between love and survival? What do they believe about men, and about the way a relationship should feel?

3. One aspect of adolescence is the testing of limits, which is why it can be such a dangerous passage in life. Why does Christina court death so regularly? How do Beam and Robin help her achieve not only safe passage, but also the ability to live independently? Is that the ultimate test of successful parenting?

4. Another element of adolescence is experimentation. How, ultimately, do we know which aspects of our behavior are pure experimentation and which ones reflect our true identity? Have you ever encountered a situation in which the line between healthy and harmful experimentation was not easy to discern?

5. How do the teens in the book compare to others you have known? What were the greatest dangers you faced as a teen? Who built your safety net?

6. How do you think Christina feels about surviving? What does her sparrow tattoo mean to you?

## **D. Beauty**

1. “Body” presents the risks and rewards of taking estrogen. Should it be easier to obtain, or do the risks need to be studied further? For people who are transgender, are hormones a medical treatment or a beauty treatment?
2. How is beauty defined by the various populations in the book—by Beam and Robin, by transgirls, and by straight men? How have you defined beauty at various points in your life?
3. Do the pop stars who are idolized by teenage girls present a purely sexual version of beauty? In “Commencement,” what does Christina mean when she says she wants to look up to herself instead of to glossy magazine images? Which idols have you looked up to over the years? What do those idols indicate about your self-image at those times?
4. In the midst of the setbacks depicted in “Skidmarks,” Beam describes one of Robin’s dreams, which becomes a beautiful image to comfort them when the situation with Christina gets rough: “The three of us were on a rooftop . . . We were all laughing. We were all comfortable, older, and easy around one another. Christina was healthy and self-assured.” What aspects of beauty are presented in this vision? Does the vision come true, symbolically? Describe a beautiful vision that has sustained you.
5. In “Body,” Beam presents well-researched facts about gender-reassignment surgery, incorporating Foxx’s story throughout the chapter. In “Commencement,” Foxx decides against gender-reassignment surgery. What leads her to this decision? How is her decision-making process different from that of someone considering breast implants or liposuction, or other procedures designed to make a person look “sexier”?

## **E. The Future**

1. Does Foxx’s experience with the film industry indicate social progress or a limited mind-set?
2. In the last paragraph of “Change,” Beam eloquently describes her realization that “there is no ‘bad’ kid worth discarding.” What options does your community provide (if any) to children who don’t receive parenting from their biological parents? How could you become an agent for change?
3. What did you learn about the legal quandaries posed by the current use of gender-specific language, such as hurdles in obtaining passports, driver’s licenses, and marriage certificates? What are the ramifications for jailed individuals, such as Domineque?
4. What does the future hold for transgender America?

## **An Interview with Cris Beam**

1. *When did you realize the story of Christina and her friends would become a book? What were the most challenging scenes to write?*

I actually thought about writing a book about transgender teenagers several months into my teaching at Eagles, both because the kids there were so interesting and because they wanted to see themselves reflected in the media so badly. They kept urging me to make a “transgender *Seventeen*” magazine, with lots of photographs.

When I started getting close to Christina, I thought at first, “Uh-oh, I’ve lost all my journalistic distance. Better keep her out of the book.” But then, slowly, I realized Christina *was* the book. I realized we had come into each other’s lives to teach each other something, and that this relationship, this growth, was a vital part of the story. I also saw that chronicling several years in the lives of a small group of people would go a lot deeper and ultimately be more honest than superficial profiles of a giant cast of characters.

As far as the most difficult scenes to write, I would say the ones where Christina was really being self-destructive—such as when she stole the car or went back on drugs. These were hard to live through, let alone recapture in print! I was aware, much as I tried not to be, that she’d be reading them someday, and I was worried that she’d be hurt by them, or resent me for calling her out like that. And then I worried that this concern was somehow subconsciously keeping me from writing the scenes with as much grit or raw detail as I needed to. I’m a journalist by training; you’re never supposed to protect your sources—let alone love them. So I’d struggle with each word—checking and rechecking myself to make sure that I was neither softening the reality, nor overcompensating and hardening the edges. I tried to be the neutral observer, just recapturing details as a reader would see them, but this was tough because I was anything but neutral.

2. *What discoveries most surprised you in your research for Transparent?*

Some of the most surprising discoveries didn’t even make it into the book! For instance, for several months, I did a bunch of research into animal behavior, reading all about rainbow parrot fish that randomly change gender throughout their lives, and bighorn sheep whose females have to act like young males to garner the attention of the older bucks. It turns out dozens of animal species have recorded examples of transgender behavior, and I was so obsessed, I scrawled out pages and pages on hooded warblers, white-tailed deer, and garter snakes. But then I realized it all started to sound too Animal Kingdom, and it had the air of justification—as if seeing transsexuality in animals was what made it “okay” or “natural” in people—and I didn’t want to add to that chorus. Transgender rights should be codified without us having to point to the northern elephant seal—a claim that could always be undermined by a quick nod to anthropomorphism. Doing the historical research was surprising and a bit disheartening, because of the dearth of real material (save for the work from a few brave, and mostly contemporary, scholars). “Women dressed as men” discovered dead on battlefields, for example, are dismissed in literature as great patriots, rather than great patriots plus a few transmen spotting an

opportunity, which is probably closer to the truth. I was surprised that more historians haven't looked back at major figures—Joan of Arc, for instance—with a more critical, or even curious, eye.

3. *Give us an update on Christina. How is she doing these days? How does she feel about the book?*

Christina is great. She's working as a case manager for young women struggling with drugs and high-risk behavior. She connects these girls with resources, teaches them about HIV prevention and safety, drives them to doctors' appointments—whatever they need to make their lives safer and better. She keeps getting top performance reviews and raises, and I couldn't be prouder.

She's also going to community college, taking one or two classes a semester at night, on top of her full-time job. Recently, she and I have been looking at masters programs in either public health or social work; right now both look interesting to her. We talk on the phone at least every other day.

Christina read the book, as did all the major people in *Transparent*, in manuscript form as soon as it was finished. (This is true of everyone but Domineque, who didn't want me to send it in pieces through prison mail, where guards would have read it and potentially given her grief. Instead I just let her know what scenes and information I was including, and let Christina be her reading proxy.) Anyway, when I sent the book to Christina, I was scared; any time you depict someone else's life, there's tremendous risk involved. How do you portray someone accurately, terrible warts and all?

She read the book slowly, calling me every few days to inform me of her progress. Sometimes she was crying; always she was moved. "I didn't know you noticed all those things, girl," she said. "I didn't know you were paying so much attention."

Christina thought she had "gotten away" with a lot of things with Robin and me—that we loved her because we hadn't noticed she was being so bad, or doing drugs, or whatever. But when she saw herself so blatantly portrayed in *Transparent*, and still ultimately triumphant and deeply loved, she realized even more how worthy she is and how committed we are to her. Our relationship grew closer after she read the book.

4. *How did your experience in Los Angeles shape your life as a teacher? What is it like to teach at a university after teaching in alternative high schools?*

Teaching high school in Los Angeles made me realize I wanted to incorporate teaching into my career permanently. For one thing, it helps my writing to explain the practical mechanics of what I'm doing, especially to a bunch of ADD-addled teenagers who are bored from the get-go. There's no room for complacency in teaching, at least if you care about it. Plus, teenagers and young adults are endlessly, maddeningly creative; while they may not have the kind of discipline and follow-through it takes to actually complete a project, they also don't have the kind of filters and internal editors that stop a lot of us

from even starting. So I found I learned from their energy and impulsiveness, and I wanted to continue teaching to continue drawing from that well.

Teaching at a university is very different from teaching high school. For one thing, students don't threaten me with guns. (This actually happened to me once!) For another, the libraries are much better. At Columbia and New School, my colleagues are brilliant and the academic environment in general is intellectually rich and challenging. Still, I know that my students at Eagles—for a whole host of reasons including poverty, academic discrimination, lack of family support, and negative internalized belief systems—don't generally have access to the kinds of universities where I'm teaching now. So I imagine I'll teach some more alternative high school classes here in New York. Plus adolescents are so crazy and funny; I can't resist their energy.

*5. In the absence of a stable biological mother, who were your role models for good parenting? Before moving to the West Coast, had you and Robin ever thought about becoming parents?*

I was lucky in that when I left my mother's house, I went to live with my father and stepmom, who had also been present throughout my early childhood. They were struggling at times in their own ways, but they were loving parents and they were stable. Among other things, my dad and stepmom were very supportive of my writing, always telling me that I was talented and smart, and showing off the books and poems I was forever doling out. This helped me know how to nurture the seeds of talent I saw and see in Christina. I also think a person can heal from early parental losses through later relationships—and I have to say, Robin taught me a lot in our fourteen years together about unconditional love, and about trust. While she obviously never parented me, Robin helped me stitch together a kind of faith in longevity, which I never had before her—and which a person certainly needs to parent teenagers. You need a very long view because the in-the-moment acting up can be quite painful.

Before we moved to Los Angeles, Robin and I had a vague idea of wanting a family; we just didn't know how exactly that would manifest. We had toyed with the idea of me actually carrying a baby, but then dropped that plan for a whole host of reasons. Now we're planning to foster another teenager, probably within the next two years.

*6. What are you writing now?*

I'm working on two things simultaneously. Unfortunately, Robin was diagnosed with breast cancer last April, so I've been writing a lot about that—about sickness, partnership, fear, and, actually, body modification from a whole other perspective. Robin's doing well—she's going through chemo right now—and in a way, because we're so close, I'm going through it all with her. But then again, I'm also obviously not—she's physically very much alone. It's a very strange, and interesting, place from which to write.

I'm also working on a book about the state of foster care in America. So many kids in *Transparent* had been in foster care at some point, and they all had so much to say (mostly about the system's deep and abundant flaws) that I wanted to write a book just about that. There are half a million kids in foster care right now, left to dangle somewhere between adoption and family reunification, and I think their oversight (using both meanings of that word) can say a lot about our values as a culture or country.

**About the Author**

Journalist CRIS BEAM holds an MFA in nonfiction writing from Columbia University and has written for several national magazines as well as for public radio. She lives in New York, where she teaches creative writing at Columbia and the New School.

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