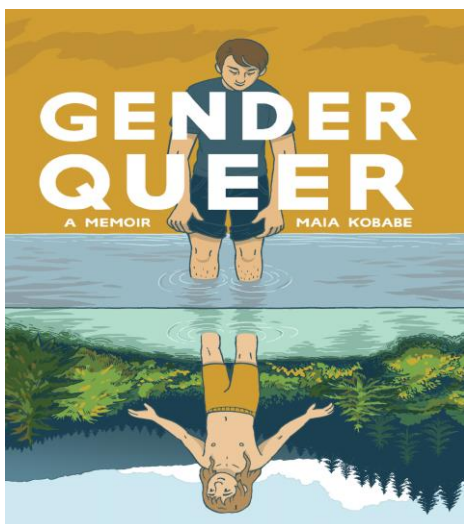


## Book Review

### *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe

*Gender Queer: A Memoir*. Author: Maia Kobabe. Publication Date: 2019. Pages: 240. Publisher: Lion Forge ISBN: 978-1-5493-0400-2.



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*Gender Queer: A Memoir* is one of the most challenged books in the US since its publication in 2019. The life and creative expressions of Maia Kobabe, an American cartoonist, serve to challenge the conventional heterosexual coherence that our society is built upon. Through eir work *Gender Queer: A Memoir* which is presented in graphic format, Maia recounts eir experiences during childhood and adolescence, grappling with uncertainties surrounding gender identity, sexuality, and the process of coming out. The memoir is composed of a retrospective standpoint after Maia has come to embrace a non-binary, genderqueer identity and identifies as asexual.

Maia employs personal pronouns such as "e," "em," and "eir," aligning with eir non-binary genderqueer and asexual sexual identity. The graphic memoir serves as a medium for Maia to recall the complexities of eir body, gender, and sexuality-related ambivalence throughout early life, utilising both visual and textual elements to articulate these emotional struggles.

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As discussed by McCloud, the boundless and dynamic possibilities in comics (pp. 212) render it a suitable platform for individuals with queer identities to articulate their thoughts and experiences beyond the limitations of linguistic structures alone. Building upon the insights of McCloud and Eisner, comics is perceived as a versatile medium or language capable of accommodating and conveying diverse ideas and imagery. Maia, in eir artistic, literary work, harnesses this expressive vessel to recount eir personal odyssey through the realm of gender identities and sexual orientations. Notably, this vessel exhibits malleability, adapting to the content it encapsulates, thereby accommodating and reflecting the nuances of Maia's narrative journey.

Maia possesses female anatomical characteristics but does not identify as female, which includes feelings of discomfort associated with features such as breasts and menstruation. The idea of penetration within eir vagina evokes psychological horror. Maia contemplates the possibility of undergoing top surgery to remove eir breasts, a procedure that arose due to extreme discomfort during a pap smear examination involving a speculum.

Despite experiencing discomfort with female organs, Maia does not seek to transition to a male identity. While Maia recalls occasional desires for male genitalia in the memoir, eir overall aspiration is to transcend the confines of the gender binary and avoid being categorised as distinctly male or female. The memoir highlights eir complex relationship with eir genitals, at times experiencing pleasure in imagining male genitalia while not entirely identifying with it. Prior to identifying as genderqueer, Maia used the term "auto androphilia" to describe eir feelings, denoting sexual arousal related to the thought or image of having male genitalia or being male.

Graphic memoirs transcend the mere reliance on the memoir's narrative to convey meaning, as the medium itself plays a significant role in the process. This insight is underscored by Richard Walsh, who highlights the narrative medium's function as a semiotic instrument, facilitating the articulation of cognitive image schemata within the framework of a narrative structure. "The idea of representation is not intelligible without a medium: the media of narrative mental representations, then, are the mind's own perceptual and conceptual systems" (Walsh 4).

Hailey Otis presents a tripartite definition of genderqueer, encompassing three distinct perspectives: a) as existing outside the binary construct, b) as an amalgamation or lack thereof of traits, and c) as fluid and adaptable. Maia Kobabe's personal account delves into the intricate emotions, distress, and yearnings associated with embracing a genderqueer identity, aligning with the aforementioned conceptualisations (pp. 31). By asserting and identifying as genderqueer, Kobabe actively resists the conventional binary norms that govern gender, thereby expanding the horizon of gender expressions and categories beyond the confines of traditional binaries. In doing so, eir narrative challenges the established gender status quo and contributes to the burgeoning discourse on post-modern and post-structural conceptions of gender and sexualities, advocating for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of the gender spectrum.

Charlie McNabb defines dysphoria in their book *Nonbinary Gender Identities* as intense distress arising from misgendering or a perceived incongruity between one's gender identity and physical sex (pp. 10). Maia experienced a sense of disassociation and panic in response to the bodily functions and organs associated with eir female identity. The onset of puberty proved distressing, resulting in gore nightmares. As a non-binary, genderqueer individual, Maia lacked the language

to comprehend or articulate the emotional turmoil eir experienced. At puberty, Maia began experiencing body dysphoria, which led em to defy the conventional gender binaries of male and female. By doing so, Maia actively challenged societal adherence to the normative body and gender structures. Maia employs eir pre-discursive body, which exists prior to female gender subjectivity, as a tool of resistance against the normative gender binary. This resistance is artfully portrayed through the medium of comics.

In the memoir, Maia's sexuality is intricately intertwined with eir gender. Maia embraces the fluidity of eir sexuality, rejecting the presumption of universal heterosexuality. Eir sexual identity has been evolving, evident in the romantic and sexual connections formed during eir twenties. The complexity of Maia's gender journey makes it challenging to categorise eir sexuality. By adopting a flexible and changeable identity, Maia defies the societal expectation of adhering to a fixed heterosexual norm and disrupts the heterosexual matrix imposed by society (Diamond 70).

The following figure is one such example from the book that expresses Maia's confusion regarding eir gender and sexuality.



Figure. 1

Figure. 1 challenges the prevailing heteronormative framework by dismantling normative concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality. Maia disrupts the binary understanding of sex,

heterosexuality, and the alignment of gender identity with assigned sex at birth through this figure. The page is divided into two panels, one with a distinct border and the other borderless. In the bordered panel, a distraught Maia's troubled thoughts are conveyed through narrative boxes and captions, revealing the internal monologue: "But why am I like this? Sometimes I feel like my sexuality is broken, and my gender is broken." The expressions and postures of Maia's outward body reflect confusion and distress, allowing readers to grasp eir experiences as a genderqueer person from eir perspective, fostering empathy rather than assumption.

Maia's thoughts and confusion from the previous panel are represented in the borderless panel. Maia writes, "I feel like there are all these wires in my brain which were supposed to connect BODY to GENDER IDENTITY and SEXUALITY. But they've all been twisted into a HUGE SNARLED MESS." The intertwined imaginary wires symbolise the intricate and intangible experiences and distress Maia underwent while identifying as a genderqueer asexual. This abstract concept portrays the complexity of Maia's journey to self-identification.

Numerous school libraries nationwide in the US have opted to ban the book, citing reasons such as LGBTQ content, inappropriate nudity, and explicit sexual material. Lily Freeman, a high school junior belonging to the queer community, expressed her perspective on this matter in a news channel, stating that depriving students of such materials is a form of active harm and creates an unsafe environment within the school setting.

In a recent interview (2023) with the author conducted by MLive about the book ban, Maia recommends the book to high school students and above, and e also believes that there might be some junior high readers who are also ready for the content. This belief is drawn from eir own experience of questioning and exploring similar topics around the age of 11 and 12. E also believes that a book like this would have been immensely beneficial for eir between the ages of 12 and 13, as this was the time Maia actively searched for information but encountered difficulties finding it. According to the author, the book's primary objective is to assist others in understanding themselves better if they are facing difficulties in comprehending what they are going through, having a complex queer identity, especially in adolescence.

As an individual who was born and raised in India, my understanding of diverse gender and sexualities has been limited. During my education in a Christian convent school, the subject of LGBTQIA+ was never broached, and it remained disconnected from my lived social reality. However, I have noticed that societal attitudes are changing, with increasing awareness and discourse surrounding various gender diversities and sexualities, even among school children. The book *Gender Queer: A Memoir* is poised to contribute significantly to this emerging awareness and facilitate conversations that challenge binary stereotypes and prejudices prevalent in our culture. Doing so will support individuals struggling with gender and sexual identities that lie outside the confines of the normative heterosexual cis-gendered society.

The significance of this book lies not only in its narrative content but also in its graphic medium, which offers the author a safe and expressive environment to communicate personal memories and experiences. As graphic novels gain recognition and acceptance as legitimate literature, particularly with the rise of digital platforms and webcomics, readers are increasingly drawn to the medium, especially those exploring queer graphic memoirs. *Kari* by Amruta Patil is one such

example from the Indian context that delves into the protagonist's complex identities, such as gender identity and sexuality that lie entangled in her urban alienation. The evolving acceptance of diverse gender and sexualities in society is being facilitated by works like *Gender Queer: A Memoir* and *Kari*. These graphic novels play a vital role in fostering conversations and challenging societal norms, contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of human experiences.

### **Declaration of Conflicts of Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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