

## They, Them, or Human? Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* Charms Readers and Identifies the Humanity in the Misunderstood

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Jeff Garvin paints an incredible picture of Riley Cavanaugh in *Symptoms of Being Human*. Riley, of Park Hills, California, is a lot of things: the new kid at school, teenager, (pretty famous) blogger, a flirt, and most importantly, the kid of a congressman running for reelection. Can it get any worse?

With all eyes on Riley, the pressure to blend in has become incredibly important. That is, until people start to notice just what Riley wears. He, she, or worse, “it” are all pronouns thrown around in a setting that would normally just be standard teen gossip. But is it? We’re given an inside look into the life of someone who is gender-nonconforming, and for Riley, it isn’t good. Though the book never really discloses Riley’s gender assigned at birth or their preferred pronouns, the development of the story highlights that this might not be so important. It certainly isn’t when I consider, looking back, just how pure Riley really is. Alongside the reader, discerning whether Riley is a normal anxious teen or if something bigger is at play here are Riley’s parents, and they are relentless. Coming from a place of love, the two require a lot from Riley: their presence, making appropriate “first impressions” (as their dad likes to say) and ensuring that Riley always acts “normal” are all on the table, and Riley feels like it isn’t achievable.

Readers slowly fall in love with Riley as we watch the development of their sass, activism, and figuring out their own identity, and Riley shows us how scary it feels to not feel right (whatever “right” even means). Feeling like a boy one day and a girl the next is Riley’s everyday experience. For a diverse reader base, this might be initially off-putting, but the portrayal of Riley that Garvin paints shows just how universal Riley’s experience really is, connecting even the most conservative reader with the pain and joy this nonconforming character vividly experiences.

Perfect for the classroom, this book takes a fierce anti-bullying approach through the experiences we see in following Riley, especially for transgender/non-binary and LGBT youth. Though some sections might not be age-appropriate for all students (read: the impending and disturbing sexual assault of Riley by the story’s perpetual bully), the message ultimately displayed is one of hope, survival, and self-acceptance. Visibility for trans youth is shockingly sparse, and exposing cisgender (and trans) kids to the experiences shared by them all will be overwhelmingly helpful in fostering an accepting student body, which is what Riley wanted all along.

He, she, or both? Riley Cavanaugh might be one, the other, or neither, but illuminates that it never really matters. After all, it’s all just a symptom of being human.

### Author Biography

Elizabeth Vest is an aspiring English Educator attending Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas. She has earned an Associate’s Degree in Visual Art from Butler Community College, and is currently working towards her Bachelor’s Degree in Secondary English Education. Elizabeth works at the Boys and Girls Clubs of South Central Kansas with young people ranging in age from kindergarten to twelfth grade, and works on campus at WSU as a tutor. She is motivated by the human connection and the idea that the world will become a better place. She can be reached at [egvest@shockers.wichita.edu](mailto:egvest@shockers.wichita.edu).