



Uglier

Kelly Vincent

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A gender nonconforming teenager learns to eschew the “rules” and follow what’s in their own heart in the affirming novel Uglier.

Kelly Vincent’s novel *Uglier* follows a gender nonconforming junior through their first semester at an Oklahoma boarding school.

Sixteen-year-old Nic chooses to transfer to a boarding school to get away from their conservative small town and to focus on their art. Shy and anxious, Nic nevertheless befriends fellow book lovers Jenna and Mack. An opportunity for an art mentorship makes Nic question their abilities, though. They work to balance their art, rigorous schoolwork, and budding social life while navigating the waters of learning about their gender identity. Bullies, social anxiety, and lack of self-worth are all obstacles that prevent Nic from embracing their identity and taking charge of their future.

Nic begins the school year using she/her pronouns and resents when people call them “sir” because of their choice of androgynous presentation. They are not confident in their nonbinary identity and are not out to anyone except themselves. Their fear of bullies, unspoken social rules, and being wrong about themselves makes them retreat into their mind, where they plan drawings of dragons and think about books. Nic’s friends Jenna and Mack provide support as they evolve on their own. Mack’s confident yet aloof presentation falters when he reveals that he has been questioning his sexuality, while Jenna’s self-assuredness encourages Nic to open up more to others. Their friendship is at the story’s heart; the book extols the value of found family throughout.

However, the chapters run long, and there are too few page breaks, leading to a cramped progression. While Nic and their friends are happy to discuss their interests for hours, their extended conversations about books and art further slow the story down. Nic’s nervousness about being vulnerable is the primary cause of tension—amplified by the fact that Nic often contradicts themselves, as when they feel an urge to speak to a classmate but then say nothing. And Nic conveys a lot of information through their thoughts that may have had more impact if spoken aloud with others. Nic’s growth, in this volume, is limited as a result of these habits.

Still, Nic’s contemplations on gender are nuanced throughout, reflecting genuine confusion and unintentional errors; Nic knows that some of their gut reactions to trans identity are inappropriate, but they are as yet unsure about why. As they educate themselves, their understanding of trans identities and their own gender identity deepens, and their introspective narration grows wiser. At first limited to considering what “rules” about gender, sexuality, and relationships they are supposed to follow, they soon realize that following what’s in their own heart is what’s most important.

Uglier is a heartwarming LGBTQ+ novel about found family and self-confidence.

AIMEE JODOIN (June 11, 2024)

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