



Ugliest

Kelly Vincent

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A sweet, anxious agender teenager comes into their own while facing new challenges in the involving novel Ugliest.

Kelly Vincent's novel *Ugliest* is the earnest continuation of an agender Oklahoma teenager's coming-of-age story.

Nic is at the start of their junior year at the Oklahoma Academy for Mathematics and Science, or OAMS. Nic struggles with socialization because they were bullied in the past. As a result, they're nervous to start a group mentorship program with a local artist. Their comfort stretches thinner when their gender-neutral bedroom is taken away and they're forced to return to the girls' dorms. Then their friends rope them into making TikTok videos about LGBTQ+ issues. Despite their initial discomfort, Nic finds themselves opening up to new experiences and growing into their identity.

Nic is a sweet, anxious lead whose story is involving. They come into their own as the story progresses; between getting a gender-affirming haircut, recognizing their judgmental instincts, and putting active efforts toward bravery, Nic challenges their social anxiety and the preconceived notions they have about others. Because Nic was bullied so often, they assume that certain people—religious Christians, for instance, or girly girls—won't like them. As Nic gets more used to having friends and acquaintances, they realize that they've been judging others just as others have been judging them—a lesson about tolerance and hypocrisy. Nic's story also models socializing past bullying, despite how hard that can be.

Still, each of Nic's three storylines—the art mentorship, the TikTok account, and the rooming dilemma—are slow to start, with conflicts first arising almost a third of the way through the book. Further, some elements of each are underdeveloped. But themes of inclusion and exclusion are woven throughout Nic's daily life, and their story is used to illustrate the impacts of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation on individual children's lives. In a powerful example of the dangers and cruelties of nonsensical transphobic legislation, Nic's friend Mack, a transmasculine senior at OAMS, needed to be legally adopted by his aunt in Oklahoma in order to get gender-affirming health care because his supportive parents were reported to authorities in Texas.

Both Mack's and Nic's experiences evoke helplessness and frustration: for one of the group's TikTok videos, Nic describes the experience of growing up agender and feeling like a defective girl, and it's a well-crafted, emotional scene. However, some such emotions are hindered by the straightforward prose, which eschews figurative language, and by the awkward rhetorical questions included in some of the book's transitions. Still, the story's earnestness and youthfulness makes Nic's slice-of-life story enjoyable.

In the coming-of-age novel *Ugliest*, a shy agender teenager learns about friendship, discrimination, and their own queer identity.

LEAH BLOCK (June 17, 2024)

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