

## Virtually Me

**Chad Morris**

**Shelly Brown**

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In Chad Morris and Shelly Brown's engaging novel *Virtually Me*, three adolescents attend an experimental virtual junior high school.

In the midst of the lingering pandemic, Bradley, Edelle, and Hunter are getting ready to enter the seventh grade. Each student has enrolled in Balderstein Junior High's new, home-based, virtual academy. Introverted, quirky Bradley yearns for a fresh start, while Edelle's Palestinian mother wants her daughter to stop being so fixated on popularity, boys, and social media. Hunter excels at sports and in-person contact, but his recent issues with alopecia have changed his appearance and undermined his brash personality.

After receiving their virtual gear, including goggles with face-tracking cameras, the students create avatars. Though an enhanced actual photograph is suggested, Bradley opts for being less "boring" and more "rock star." To minimize superficiality, Edelle's mother insists that she use a "basic," plain girl avatar. Edelle and Bradley also assume different names, while Hunter keeps his own identity.

The program has fascinating aspects, like team video game tournaments and replicated classrooms and gymnasiums. Bradley feels liberated by his new pink-haired, K-pop-inspired self; Edelle is dismayed by the diminished attention from boys that her avatar receives; and Hunter struggles to adjust to an intangible realm he can't quite dominate. Concepts of individuality and peer perception are handled with humor and compassion, and subtle details indicate at restrictive group dynamics: Edelle now enjoys eating homemade falafel with her family at lunchtime, though when she was attending conventional school, she never wanted to bring it for lunch—it might look too different.

Bradley, Edelle, and Hunter evolve through their virtual interactions, learning emotional and social lessons that resonate in real life. Beyond its wondrous simulations, at the heartfelt core of *Virtually Me* is the awkward, funny, and incomparable essence of being truly human.

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