THE FRACTURED LIFE OF BECCA CREASE, A NOVEL: EXPLORING A TEENAGER’S RELATIONSHIP WITH A NON-BINARY PARENT, FAMILY RESILIENCE, AND LANGUAGE IN THE MIDDLE GRADE NOVEL, THE FRACTURED LIFE OF BECCA CREASE, AN EXEGESIS

by

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*The Fractured Life of Becca Crease, A Novel: Exploring a Teenager’s Relationship with a Non-Binary Parent, Family Resilience, and Language in the Middle Grade novel, The Fractured Life of Becca Crease, An Exegesis*

submitted by Anita Miettunen in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

Children and teens can—and often do—look for representation of their lives in children’s literature. An emerging area in children’s fiction is the inclusion of transgender and non-binary characters. However, these fictional characters are usually teens, although increasingly, children are being included. There are few works that include transgender and non-binary parents, even though they are part of our society, leading to a gap in children’s literature. Notably, *Happy Families*, the earliest mainstream children’s novel with a transgender parent, was only published in 2012. In this exegesis, I explore the research strategies and creative process involved in developing my children’s middle grade novel, *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease*, which features a key relationship between a teenaged protagonist and her non-binary parent. I discuss how transgender and non-binary parents are portrayed in published English language children’s literature and materials in North America. Additionally, I explain how my process of writing a contemporary novel was informed by understanding how children and teens may experience a parent’s gender transition, particularly within a family resiliency framework, and how mainstream society’s awareness of gender identity and associated language is rapidly shifting. While there are currently very few stories portraying families with transgender or non-binary parents, highlighting this gap may bring awareness to writers and publishers concerned with improving diversity in children’s publishing.
Lay Summary

An emerging area in children’s fiction is the inclusion of transgender and non-binary characters. However, most of these fictional characters are teenagers, although children are increasingly being included, and very few books feature families with transgender or non-binary parents. Happy Families, the earliest mainstream children’s novel with a transgender parent, was only published in 2012. The Fractured Life of Becca Crease is a children’s novel I wrote which features a teenaged protagonist with a non-binary parent. In developing my manuscript, I analyzed how transgender and non-binary parents are portrayed in children’s fiction; how children and teens may experience a parent’s gender transition, particularly within a family resiliency framework; and how mainstream society’s awareness of gender identity and associated language is rapidly shifting. By highlighting gaps in how families with transgender and non-binary parents are represented in children’s fiction, my work can contribute to broader discussions around diversity in children’s literature.
Preface

This exegesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Anita Miettunen. It is the academic portion only of a hybrid creative/academic thesis. The creative portion consists of a children’s novel manuscript, *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease*, also written exclusively by Anita Miettunen.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... iii

Lay Summary ..................................................................................................................... iv

Preface ................................................................................................................................. v

Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. vi

List of Abbreviations ......................................................................................................... viii

Glossary ............................................................................................................................ ix

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... xi

## Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................1

1.1 Motivation for Research and Origins of Interest ................................................. 1

1.2 Summary of *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease* .................................................. 3

1.3 Research Focus and Questions ............................................................................... 4

1.4 Significance of the Study ...................................................................................... 5

## Chapter 2: Literature Review .......................................................................................8

2.1 An Overview of Transgender Parents in Children’s Literature ............................ 8

2.2 Themes in Key Reference Texts ............................................................................ 10

2.3 Social Context ....................................................................................................... 12

## Chapter 3: My Creative Process .................................................................................15

3.1 Introduction to Writing *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease* .............................. 15

3.2 Considerations of Families in Transition ............................................................ 16

3.3 Considerations of Audience and Language ......................................................... 18

3.4 Additional Research Consideration of Educational Contexts ............................ 20

3.5 Writing *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease* Conclusions ................................ 22

## Chapter 4: Conclusion and Reflection ........................................................................23
Works Cited
List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MG</td>
<td>Middle Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YA</td>
<td>Young Adult</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGBTQ</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer</td>
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Glossary

The following terms referred to in this exegesis are partially adapted from *Trans/Portraits: Voices From Transgender Communities* whose author has indicated they are “ever changing, and might not speak to the experiences or identities of many” (Shultz 195).

**Children’s Literature**
Material written and produced for the information or entertainment of children and young adults. This may be used as an umbrella term, and/or interchangeably, to include materials for middle grade and young adult readers. It includes all non-fiction, literary and artistic genres and physical formats.

**Cisgender**
A person whose gender identity and expression matches their assigned sex at birth.

**Gender**
Refers to socially constructed roles, activities, behaviours, and attributes assigned to people and groups based on their physical/primary sex characteristics.

**Gender Expression**
A person’s outward expression of their gender identity.

**Gender Identity**
A person’s internal sense of belonging to a particular gender category.

**Genderqueer/Gender nonconforming**
Terms that often refer to non-normative or non-binary gender identity or expression.

**Heteronormative**
The belief that being heterosexual is the norm. Refers to activities/expression/roles that conform to expectations around heterosexuality.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>A broadly inclusive term describing individuals who do not conform to the masculine/feminine binary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans</td>
<td>An abbreviated term for transgender. May also include transsexual and other identities that cross binaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>An umbrella term that may include anyone whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>The process of aligning one’s body (and/or gender expression) with one’s gender identity. This may or may not involve one or more social, medical, or surgical process/treatment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transphobia</td>
<td>An irrational fear or hatred of transgender or gender nonconforming people; the mistreatment, discrimination, and oppression that transgender people experience.</td>
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</tbody>
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Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Emily Pohl-Weary, who provided unwavering support throughout this project; I’m grateful for your advice, insights, and enthusiasm as I figured out how to write my novel. I also thank the following people for their help:

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My classmates in the CRWR 2016-17 workshop, and instructors Maggie de Vries and Dr. Emily Pohl-Weary, who critiqued my early scribblings.

As I developed early chapters of my novel, I appreciated feedback on short excerpts from the following people: members of The Purple Stapler Writers Forum (2017); my fellow Children’s Writers and Illustrators (CWILL) Society of B.C. writers with whom I attended retreats in 2017 and 2018; 2018 Simon Fraser University writer-in-residence, Ivan Coyote, with whom I consulted on a chapter in September 2018.

I am grateful to my workplace for the flexible work arrangements, tuition support, and enthusiasm for my writing goals. Additionally, I thank the School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies and Dr. Ronald Jobe for the financial support I received through
scholarships; and the Faculty of Arts Graduate Student Research Award which allowed me to visit the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria in Victoria, BC.

I especially thank my friends and family for listening, love, and support.
Chapter 1: Introduction

My thesis is a hybrid creative/academic project, whose main part is a creative component, namely, an unpublished middle grade (MG) children’s novel I wrote called, *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease*, (35,000 words). The academic component consists of this exegesis, which highlights my key areas of research and creative process for completing my manuscript.

This exegesis uses a variety of terms whose definitions and acceptance/nonacceptance may vary by community. For the purposes of my discussion, the word “transgender” is considered an umbrella term that may include a wide variety of identities (*e.g.*, transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, plus many others) and also includes anyone who identifies as non-binary, which some individuals also consider to be an umbrella term. The term “parent” includes any person fulfilling a parenting role, and is not exclusive to a biological parent.

1.1 Motivation for Research and Origins of Interest

*The Fractured Life of Becca Crease* is a middle grade novel inspired by personal experience, and shaped by memory and imagination. When I began my studies in the Master of Arts in Children’s Literature (MACL) program, and in particular, courses in the UBC Department of Creative Writing, it was a tremendous opportunity to begin developing the skills I needed to write my novel, which tells the story of a teenaged protagonist adapting to the changes in her family when one of her parents comes out non-binary. Although *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease* began as an idea for a writing project several years ago, well before the seismic shift of the past few years in our understanding of transgender issues, it was not until fall 2016, through my Creative Writing 503 Advanced Writing for Children and Young Adults class, that I began to seriously draft early chapters.
Beyond North America, many cultures have accepted and even celebrated transgender populations. However, a decade or so ago, I rarely noticed transgender issues being discussed in western society, outside of transgender communities or research circles, and certainly not regularly in the media, in the workplace, or within our educational institutions. Fortunately, there is growing awareness and understanding that transgender people have always existed. In recent years, we’ve begun to more openly discuss transgender issues and mainstream understanding of gender is evolving rapidly. Nonetheless, prejudices, mistreatment, and hate crimes against transgender individuals continue in many segments of North American society. Even now, within heteronormative legal systems, such as family court, transgender parents may need to prove themselves to be “normal” and that their trans identity does not negatively impact their children (Boyce and Boyce 60).

For me, writing about an alternative family structure and the relationship between a child and a non-binary parent was important because a multiplicity of family stories exist parallel to mainstream family stories (which typically centre around heteronormative expectations); this was an opportunity write about such a family and share a story about the power of love. The goal for my MACL project is to bring to light, from a child’s viewpoint, a seldom-told story about adaptation and resiliency in such a family. Building on a framework of family resiliency, and infusing the story with ample humour, I also hope my novel will reach a broad readership, but especially children who have a transgender or non-binary parent. While the story tackles some challenging family issues, I did not wish it to be solely an “issues” book. I’ve long admired children’s books that could weave in humour with topics such as relationship challenges in families. Books written by Judy Blume, Kate DiCamillo, Susan Juby, Susin Nielsen, and Jacqueline Woodson were particularly important to me while drafting my manuscript. Many of their books helped me think through the emotional life of my characters and consider how I
might incorporate humour into my story, which I believe is a powerful bridge in connecting with readers.

1.2 Summary of The Fractured Life of Becca Crease

The Fractured Life of Becca Crease is a coming-of-age story of a young teenaged girl adapting to new family dynamics. The protagonist, Becca Crease, has a knack for photography, enjoys shooting cooking videos with her best friend, Cypress Lee, and wants to become a filmmaker. She also lives in a conservative suburban Canadian neighbourhood where some people still hold limited viewpoints regarding the gender binary and transgender individuals.

When Becca’s father announces that he’s non-binary, she wants nothing more than to keep things about her family under the radar. While she loves her dad, who remains comfortable with being called “dad” and continues to use “he” and “him” – literary choices I’ve made drawing from personal experience but which I recognize not everyone will agree with – and wants him to be happy, at times she’s also embarrassed, and worried about being stigmatized or bullied, something she’s experienced in the past. She grapples with confusion and misunderstandings, and worries about her dad’s well-being and safety as he contemplates surgery. She’s also worried about her friendships and reputation.

Over the course of the novel, as her father increasingly opens up about his gender transition and becomes an activist, Becca’s relationships and friendships ebb and flow. While she struggles to understand and adapt to changes in her family, Becca ultimately grows and embraces her new family dynamics.
1.3 Research Focus and Questions

I undertook a variety of research strategies to inform my writing process and balance the content in my novel. This exegesis summarizes my key areas of research:

i. How are transgender and non-binary parents portrayed in published English language children’s literature and materials in North America?

ii. Within a family resiliency framework, how do children experience a parent’s gender transition and how might this inform my novel?

iii. How is society’s understanding of gender identity and associated language changing and how might this influence my writing?

As society becomes more open about transgender experiences, growing numbers of fictional children’s books are being published which feature transgender protagonists. This emerging trend primarily focuses on characters who are teens, although increasingly, children are also being included within MG fiction. Notably, however, there are very few books that portray families with transgender or non-binary parents. As part of my creative process, to help me better understand the context of my own writing, I explored what kinds of children’s books and materials have been published in North America that depict a transgender or non-binary parent. This would potentially also help me to avoid duplicating storylines, and portraying stereotypes and tropes. I focused primarily on middle grade (MG) and Young Adult (YA) texts and discuss my review of two key reference texts in Chapter 2.

Our society’s understanding of gender and gender identity is rapidly changing, as is the language associated with these topics. I wanted to be up-to-date with this evolution and to weigh carefully my choice of words, to ensure my manuscript would be relevant to today’s young
readers. So that I could make realistic decisions when depicting my main character’s reactions to her family’s changes, it was important for me to learn more about what social research on families is indicating regarding how children adjust when a parent undergoes a gender transition. As my writing progressed, family relationships and transitions emerged as an important theme, and a family resiliency framework especially resonated with me. I found this theoretical framework an effective way to explore and describe family transitions, and inform my enquiry into family relationships during a parent’s transition. I was thus motivated to review the published literature on family resiliency for families experiencing a parent undergoing a gender transition, with a view to ensuring my manuscript would reflect a wider understanding of this issue and resonate with a broad readership. Through publicly available comments posted online in blogs and support forums, I was also able to read what teens themselves had to say specific to when they first learned their parent was transgender or non-binary. In Chapter 3, I elaborate further on how these aspects have influenced my writing process.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of finding literature that reflects the lives of diverse people cannot be overemphasized. As succinctly summarized by Sandy et al., “Literature reflects society. It helps us understand which ideas and groups are accepted and which are excluded. Omission of certain cultures from the mainstream literature position them as undervalued in society and reifies the marginalization of those cultures to members of the dominant culture (Sandy et al. 432).”

There are few population-based data sources available on the size and characteristics of transgender populations, and my discussion of population studies for transgender people is in general terms as the references I reviewed did not specify the term “non-binary” within the umbrella term “transgender.” Significantly, according to the latest data issued by the Williams
Institute at the University of California Law School, an estimated 1.4 million individuals ages 18 and older in the United States (US), equivalent to 0.6% of the adult population, identify as transgender (Flores, A. 2; Williams Institute 1). The per cent of trans adults may be similar in Canada, however the data is not available. A US review of 51 studies indicated that 25-50% of transgender people are parents; however, very little research has been conducted on transgender parents and families before the year 2000 (Stotzer et al. 4). In Canada, surveys of 433 trans people in Ontario indicated 24-27% were parents (Bauer et al. 1, Bauer and Scheim 2).

Children’s literature (including YA literature) that includes transgender and non-binary people as parents is essential to fully reflect our diverse society and allow young readers to find representation of their lives. Writing about families in transition (with a focus on a non-binary parent/a parent’s transition) is important to me because although these parallel narratives exist in society, there is little representation of these stories in children’s literature for children with such lived experiences. I view writing about families in transition as a unique contribution because including these new narratives can open up dialogue and lead to better understanding about gaps in children’s literature, including breaking down barriers and questioning why we might currently value certain stories over others within the publishing industry.

Sandy et al. have reflected on the importance of including marginalized groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in mainstream literature. This helps non-transgender people better understand different life experiences and shows marginalized groups that others share stories similar to them (Sandy et al. 432). By writing a story that portrays alternative family relationships, in this case, between a child and her non-binary parent, my work has the potential to raise awareness about “missing stories.” My novel could also be a resource in educational settings by offering a narrative that reflects diversity in families, although as Flores has described, there are challenges in incorporating lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
(LGBT)-themes and families into educational curricula (Flores, G. 3). Furthermore, through exploring what types of children’s literature exist featuring transgender or non-binary parents, and highlighting any gaps, my work can contribute to broader discussions amongst writers and publishers and lead to improving diversity in children’s publishing. Certainly, children with a transgender parent deserve opportunities to find published works that reflect their lives.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

While writing *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease*, I wanted to understand how my novel would fit within the context of existing children’s literature. In this chapter, I explore published children’s literature that includes transgender and non-binary parents and discuss key examples relevant to my creative process. My literature review focused primarily on middle grade (MG) and Young Adult (YA) texts, and sought to answer how transgender and non-binary parents are portrayed in published English language children’s literature and materials in North America.

2.1 An Overview of Transgender Parents in Children’s Literature

Mainstream understanding of transgender and non-binary people is expanding, and more literature is emerging with transgender or non-binary protagonists. However, within children’s literature, most fictional characters are teens (although increasingly, children are included), leading to a gap in works that include transgender or non-binary parents.

A comprehensive 2007 review of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) YA literature noted the first YA novel with LGBTQ content was published in 1969 and that between 1969 – 2004 an estimated 200 YA novels were published with an LGBTQ theme (Cart and Jenkins xv, 185). However, it was only in 2004 that the first YA novel (*Luna*) was published that clearly featured a transgender character, in this case, a sibling who is in the process of transitioning (Peters).

Mason et al. looked at a selection of award-winning LGBTQ-themed YA literature published between 2005 – 2010, and noted YA novels published in the 2000s, which featured the transgender community (Mason et al.13-15). However, although novels portraying young transgender protagonists have found a receptive readership, the representation of children’s relationships with transgender parents was and still remains nearly absent in YA literature.
From a Canadian perspective, a list of titles published by Canadian authors between 1990–2014, included 21 YA books with LGBTQ characters (Canadian). While these books included gay and lesbian characters of various ages, transgender voices were missing.

A more recent survey in 2016 of queer and trans-themed children’s literature by Bittner et al., found that publishers are slowly publishing more LGBT-themed children’s books in all genres featuring transgender children; however, they did not identify additional titles representing transgender parents and this is still true for the most part (Bittner et al. 949).

The YA novel, *Happy Families*, by Tanita Davis and published in 2012, is the earliest published children’s book I have found to date that features a transgender parent. The only other examples I have found are the 2017 MG novel, *The Disappearing Boy*, by Sonia Tilson, and the 2018 YA novel, *And She Was*, by Jessica Verdi.

While it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to discuss picture books that feature transgender or non-binary parents, I will note that in my research, I did come across some independently published titles (available through the Vancouver Public Library system) dating from 2012 and 2017, which showed a parent undergoing a gender transition. These titles were not of high quality regarding illustration standards or writing execution; but their existence merits mention as they are an important step in portraying diversity in alternative family structures, and allowing younger children to see stories about gender transition in a parent in easy-to-understand ways that can help guide further discussion.

Self-publishing is sometimes thought to open up publishing opportunities for more diverse voices. However, in a comparison of titles obtained between a traditional library vendor and a free non-traditional platform (self-published e-books), Sandy et al. found no difference in the diversity of titles between these two distinct acquisition platforms and noted that there is a
need for “characters who reflect a much larger breadth and experiences than appear in currently available titles” (Sandy et al. 447).

Although children’s fiction still lacks portrayals of trans parents, notably, online sources are increasingly publishing non-fiction stories written by children about their experiences living with transgender parents or parents who identify as non-binary (Rees; Tannehill). Memoirs of living with a transgender parent have also been published for adults (Boylan). And the anthology, *Out of the Ordinary*, a collection of essays by adult children of lesbian, gay, and transgender parents, includes reflective first-person accounts on childhood experiences growing up with a transgender parent (Howey and Samuels).

The documentary film, *In My Shoes: Stories of Youth with LGBT Parents*, produced by and about children of LGBT parents, profiled a teenaged girl with her transgender guardian (her uncle who had transitioned from female to male and married a woman), who filled a parental role (In My Shoes). While not specifically geared for children, Remy Huberdeau’s short film, *Transforming Family*, which portrays transgender parents, also includes a clip of a teenager speaking about leaving behind her confusion of what to call her male-to-female transgender parent and her admiration for the strength of her parent (Transforming).

### 2.2 Themes in Key Reference Texts

While developing my manuscript, I referred more closely to the YA novels, *Happy Families* and *And She Was*. Before discussing these specific texts, however, it is worth noting that Jacqueline Woodson’s 1995 novel, *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, in which a fourteen-year-old boy initially rebels angrily against his single mother when she tells him that she is a lesbian, was also an important reference for me. While Woodson’s novel is dated, it shows in realistic terms how a
child could rebel against a parent he deeply loves, when faced with personal information that (at the time) was not readily “approved of” by society.

Regarding the two recent texts I referenced, *Happy Families* features twin sixteen-year-old protagonists, in alternating points of view, relating to their transgender parent, in this case, a father exploring transition, while *And She Was* focuses on an eighteen-year-old girl’s relationship with her transgender parent as she learns her mother was assigned male at birth.

In both of these novels, one of the children accidentally discovers their parent’s “secret.” In *Happy Families*, one of the twins first witnesses their father dressed as a woman in public, although this incident is not initially acknowledged openly by the teen. Later, both twins are sent by their birth mother to spend a week with their transgender parent (who had left the family), during which the transgender parent and twins eventually begin steps towards acceptance and reconciliation as a family. This includes the twins participating in the parent’s transgender social activities where they meet other children with transgender parents. Notably, this novel features a successful religious family of colour, and presents a positive family outcome with both the non-transgender and transgender parent, and the children, wishing to reconcile and live together again.

In *And She Was*, eighteen year old Dara comes across her birth certificate, which according to her single mother, Mellie, had been lost. This leads Dara to discover that Mellie is transgender, and transitioned to female when Dara was very young. When she confronts Mellie, Dara learns that her birth mother died, shortly before Mellie began her transition. Only by accidentally discovering “evidence” and then confronting her mother, did Dara find out the truth. This undoubtedly heightens the tension in the plot and leads to drama for the storyline (*e.g.*, Dara takes off in search of family members she never knew she had before). Although Mellie presents a rationale as to why she chose to hide the truth from her daughter all these years (*e.g.*, previous
accusations of child abuse, a continuing fear of having Dara taken away from her), the storyline
does have some serious flaws which I mention in the next section.

While it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to review in detail Hilson’s *The Disappearing Boy*, this Canadian novel also explores family relationships featuring a youth who rebels and runs away upon discovering his family’s long-held secret that his mother was assigned male at birth.

### 2.3 Social Context

Every family experience is unique, as is the manner in which children first learn of their parent’s transition. For example, families may initiate a family meeting to explain a parent plans to transition; or a child may find out accidentally by finding clothing or other items, which can lead to a family crisis (Kanfield-Lenfest). As our society predominantly values a heteronormative structure, when a parent breaks the “rules,” transphobia may result, which can threaten the parent and family; transphobia can also be internalized by a child as negative feelings towards their parent (Kanfield-Lenfest).

In both *Happy Families* and *And She Was*, when the teens accidentally discover their parent is transgender, they have challenges accepting the truth. They experience a range of emotions such as shock, confusion, and not understanding their parent, even though they may love their parent. The teen protagonists in *Happy Families* end up spending time with their transgender parent and attending a social group with other children of transgender parents; eventually they become more comfortable with changes in their family. Notably, in *Happy Families*, the issue of the parent being transgender (and socially transitioning) is dealt with more openly; early on in the novel, the birth mother already opens up about this within the family’s religious circle and she continues to want to make contact with the transgender parent.
In *And She Was*, Dara initially rejects her mother and leaves home in anger. It is only through a series of emails while she is on a road trip and spends time with the other family members she discovers she has, that Dara slowly learns the reasons why her parent kept disclosure a secret and comes to better understand and accept her mother’s actions.

Although it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to review all aspects of each reference text, I note a few issues I had with the storyline in *And She Was*. First, part of the storyline unfolds through a series of (sometimes very long) emails from the mother, Mellie, which serve to inform Dara about her mother’s reasons to hide her gender transition. At times, the novel becomes Mellie’s story, and may have been more effective written completely from her point of view, as the book seems split in tone and style. More significantly, I found it incredulous to believe that Mellie’s “secret” could have been kept throughout Dara’s life, especially during adolescence. It’s possible that limited or no discussion between mother and daughter ever occurred about female-related topics such as periods, breasts, bras, pregnancy, and childbirth; as well as about relationships with boys (Dara is cisgender/heterosexual), dating, and sex. But living together for eighteen years, wouldn’t Dara have figured out something? It is hard to imagine that in a contemporary setting, a teen-aged Dara (or someone else in their lives) would never have picked up anything about her mother’s history, or questioned some of her mother’s behaviour (e.g., refusing to ever be seen wearing a bathing suit). It is concerning that even with greater awareness around #OwnVoices in children’s literature, similar to *The Disappearing Boy*, Mellie’s gender in *And She Was* is used as a shocking reveal to propel the storyline; and it is unfortunate that we never see the transgender parent find the strength to be open with her teenaged daughter before being “forced to.”

Notably for the two references I’ve discussed, as evidenced through online public review forums such as Goodreads, both of these books have met with mixed reviews by transgender
readers, many of whom may be youths, with several criticisms pertaining to the use of pronouns and names when referring to the transgender parent, dated language terms, and unease with teens “rejecting” a parent for being transgender. In both books, the storylines show children’s reactions and experiences of adapting to the disclosure of a parent’s gender transition. While elements of each text are open to debate, such as how self-centered the teens may be, and why Mellie only discloses who she is to her daughter when “forced to,” rather than owning her identity with pride, these two books also capture reactions that are not uncommon. These books show teenagers initially rebelling against their transgender parent’s “secret” which I believe are realistic reactions teenagers do experience as our society values heteronormative family structures.

Indeed, as recent publicly accessible chats on online forums with teenagers of transgender parents have shown, confusion and mixed emotions continue to be felt by many. In reply to anonymous questions, Kidsafe Blog guest writer, Amy Shelby has written, “As far as feeling angry and alone, I can definitely relate. It took me many years to talk to or even find someone else in my position. It’s difficult to navigate the complex emotions, especially if you are in support of transgender individuals and trans rights but you’re having mixed emotions about your personal family experience. I’ve always found that it scares me to talk about it in public for fear of being labeled transphobic or anti-trans (Shelby).”

To shed more light on these psycho-social aspects, which were relevant to my writing, in the next chapter, I discuss some research findings specific to family resiliency and how teens may adapt to a parent undergoing a gender transition, and I explain how my other research strategies tied into my creative process.
Chapter 3: My Creative Process

Although *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease* draws from my own experiences, to broaden my understanding about families with children experiencing a parental gender transition, I also reviewed published academic papers; and non-academic materials including trade books, individual blogs, films, and a website with a dedicated section for children of transgender parents that presented the viewpoints of children with transgender parents. A thorough discussion of all the materials I reviewed, and how they informed my creative process, is beyond the scope of this exegesis. However, in this chapter I will provide a few key examples specific to how the materials I reviewed, and my research strategies informed my writing.

3.1 Introduction to Writing *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease*

Both of the contemporary reference novels I discussed in Chapter 2 were valuable during my writing process to understand the current state of publishing children’s books that include a transgender or non-binary parent. Similar to *Happy Families* and *And She Was*, my novel, *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease*, shows conflict with a teen protagonist learning to accept her non-binary parent. However, I have consciously written this parent as someone who, although they have previously faced struggles and suppression, also wants to and openly does tell his children about his gender identity, and later, gender transition. I also include discussion in the family about pronoun choices.

I think it is important to show readers that a transgender or non-binary parent accepts their gender identity, and is not afraid to hide it from their children and families. This was my intention, when I first began thinking of my novel, and my literature review underscored the need to include healthy family relationships. I believe we need more stories like this, to show children of transgender or non-binary parents, and indeed any reader, the power of being true to
oneself and that visibility, when it’s a choice by the transgender or non-binary parent, should be okay no matter where you live. And as I discuss in the next section, children can and do adapt well within such families.

3.2 Considerations of Families in Transition

In families with a transgender parent, the parent may or may not undergo a gender transition; in some families, the parent may have already transitioned before having children. In contrast to emerging research on transgender youth, there is sparse published data on the experiences of children with a transgender parent, which is background information I wanted to learn more about as I developed the relationship in my novel between Becca, the teenaged protagonist, and her non-binary parent.

Publicly-available online discussions provided some insights: “When my dad first came out to me, she handed me a pamphlet about transgender people. I never read the pamphlet because I didn't want more information about her; I wanted to know what this all meant for me. Where was the ‘Your dad just came out as trans…Now what?’ booklet that I so desperately needed? I wanted someone to tell me what to expect, how to talk about it, and assure me that there was were other people out there with similar experiences (Kanfield-Lenfest).”

In one study I reviewed which included many family therapists working with children of parents undergoing a gender transition, it was reported that a parental transition is not a neutral event, and a child’s developmental level is a factor in how well they adapt to their parent’s transition (White and Ettner 130). When family conflict was low, preschool-aged children adapted the best to parental transition while teenagers appeared to have the most difficulty. Resilient adaptation by children was enhanced through supportive relationships, including with extended family; maintaining an ongoing relationship and close emotional ties with the
transitioning parent was also seen as a protective factor. As teens may face issues such as grief, personalizing the transition, and what they disclose to friends, the authors reported that extra support, especially through peer support groups, may be beneficial (White and Ettner 130).

Using a family resiliency framework, a theoretical framework for analyzing families in transition which captures the important influence of other family members (vs. individual resiliency), Dierckx et al. worked with nine families (including thirteen children) and concluded that processes such as family continuity, communication, significant others’ acceptance, and attributing meaning all help achieve the transition of a parent being accepted by a child (Dierckx et al. 10). While other researchers have reported on children experiencing a wide range of feelings such as loss, grief, betrayal, and shame, the authors point out that the viewpoints of children are rarely reflected in the research (as the research tends to focus on adults reporting observations). The research by Dierckx et al. included child participants. The authors reported that all of the children they interviewed had at some point been afraid of relationships ending and possible stigmatization related to their parent’s identity; and that teenagers “expected to have control” regarding how their transgender parent’s status was disclosed socially. However, they also noted that older children especially reported positive learning/growth experiences over time as a result of their unique family experience; and that family resiliency in families with a transgender parent could be viewed as a capacity, with several positive individual and family outcomes such as learning new skills and qualities (Dierckx et al. 10-11). The family resilience framework was a useful theoretical framework for me as the approach I took to writing my story was to portray positive family capacity.

Related to this research using a family resiliency framework, an interview project conducted out of the LGBTQ Parenting Network at the Sherbourne Health Centre in Ontario highlighted the strengths that transgender parents bring to parenting, such as by being “role
models for diversity, acceptance, and authenticity” which may create options for children and contribute to a “a new gender literate generation” (Pyne 6).

In drafting *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease*, it was natural for me to write about supporting relationships with other family members, beneficial support groups and/or therapy, and positive family outcomes regarding children’s relationships with their transgender parent. But finding that family resiliency and positive family relationships are also reflected in published studies and reports involving many other families provided me with a broader grounding and understanding in this area. This does not mean, however, that I shy away from writing about the more difficult emotions a teen could experience when a parent undergoes a gender transition, since that continues to be a reality for many teens as evidenced in some of the blogs and discussion forums I came across online (Shelby).

### 3.3 Considerations of Audience and Language

After a consultation session in September 2018, with Simon Fraser writer-in-residence, Ivan Coyote, a transgender activist, writer, and musician, who read one of my early chapters, I better understood the importance of ensuring that *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease* would also resonate with transgender youth, who could also potentially read my future novel. While my novel’s target audience is not explicitly transgender youth, I now recognize that transgender youth may also be part of my novel’s readership, and some transgender youth may be in vulnerable situations. Could my language choices as well as depictions of relationships possibly cause harm? It’s something I’m still thinking about deeply as I continue drafting my novel, not wanting to self-censor my writing, but also being more aware of the impact of words.

Through education, there is growing societal awareness about what it means to be transgender and non-binary. Language associated with this is also continuously shifting. For
example, when I began drafting *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease* in 2016, the term “gender reassignment surgery” (i.e., surgery that changes primary and/or secondary sex characteristics to affirm an individual’s gender identity) was still widely used in the media and even in information from the medical clinic I modelled events on in my novel. This term has now shifted to “gender affirming surgery,” which is viewed as a more positive and respectful term.

The question of which pronoun to use for transgender or non-binary individuals is also discussed more widely in our society these days, including in the media, and it is not uncommon for people to now ask each other about this. However, this can also potentially spark issues of concern (i.e., with more vulnerable individuals) if someone being asked is actually unsure yet about their identity and which pronoun they would choose. In the two reference texts I discussed earlier, some readers have called attention to the fact that the transgender parent in *Happy Families* identifies as a woman (and is socially transitioning) and has mentioned a new female name, but continues to be referred to by a male pronoun (i.e., “he”) throughout the book; and that relatives in *And She Was*, continue to refer to the transgender mother as a “he” and by her old male first name.

Lee Airton’s 2018 book, “*Gender: Your Guide,*” provides good background reading for anyone interested in “what to know, what to say, and what to do in the new gender culture” (Airton). Airton, a Canadian scholar who identifies as non-binary, gives practical advice for navigating our gender revolution, but also stresses that their story and gender pronoun change is not necessarily a template that will fit everyone.

When a parent transitions in a family setting with a teenager who has always referred to the parent with a certain pronoun, the issue of changing pronouns can be more challenging. I have certainly considered the questions of which pronouns and names to use for the non-binary parent in *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease*. However, from all of my readings, and
experience, I know that the use of pronouns and names is an individual choice and it is going to vary in any family. As previously mentioned, the non-binary parent in my novel continues being called “Dad” by the children; and is comfortable with “he” and “him.” I accept that some of my choices in my book may be open to scrutiny and debate, but my choices are informed by personal experience that reflect a reality for some people.

Nevertheless, as I revise my novel, it will be important to continue paying attention to shifts in language over time, to ensure my novel stays relevant to young readers.

3.4 Additional Research Consideration of Educational Contexts

Only a few decades ago (e.g., in the 1990s), a previous generation would have had greater difficulty in adjusting in a less open society to a transgender parent: “Part of the problem was that my family and I didn’t have anyone to talk to about this. My mother made all of us guard our secret. We were always supposed to protect Dad from ridicule or public scorn…What would we do if the world ever found out? What would people think? What a scandal it would make! No one would understand; they would look with judgmental eyes, and we would never be able to fit back into society again… I am now twenty-six years old. I have kept our family secret under lock-and-key for over sixteen years. It hasn’t been easy keeping this secret, because my family and I have been distanced from others because of it (Lynn 11-12).”

In July 2018, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit the Transgender Archives, housed at the University of Victoria Special Collections and University Archives. This collection comprises the largest transgender archives in the world and “is committed to the preservation of the history of pioneering activists, community leaders, and researchers who have contributed to the betterment of trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people.” I spent time sifting through their
extensive collection of transgender related periodicals, and other materials, and also spoke to the Founder and Academic Director, Dr. Aaron Devor.

One of the valuable outcomes from this field trip, which I was able to and will continue to incorporate into my novel, was looking at ephemera. This included buttons, and business cards from past decades for transgender-friendly service providers such as health care practitioners, lawyers, counsellors, and social groups, which would have been of great relevance and importance to transgender individuals in the past, when such information was not yet available via the internet. This is exactly the type of background information that has led and will lead to more subtle and realistic details being incorporated into my novel. Dr. Devor also provided me with direction regarding periodicals of interest to review, how information and learning was shared amongst transgender individuals in past decades, and what types of public conferences are currently being organized in transgender communities.

Incorporating into my novel some of the learning (e.g., a more detailed understanding of how the transgender community previously shared information before the internet) that I gained from my visit to the Transgender Archives may eventually add to this queer archive, which currently holds limited materials (e.g., research papers, articles in periodicals) about families in transition or non-binary/transgender parents. My novel will directly connect my experience of visiting the Transgender Archives by including realistic details based on my research there, which helped strengthen my writing.

Understanding more about the historical and legal context of transgender rights was also important to me as the non-binary parent in my novel becomes a transgender activist. Immersing myself in the Transgender Archives was an important reminder that where we are today regarding transgender rights is due to the activism of many brave individuals in the past. It was also a reminder that while we are experiencing a “gender revolution” right now, transgender
people have always existing throughout the world. I am now considering including a short timeline of trans activism in Canada as backmatter to my novel.

3.5 Writing The Fractured Life of Becca Crease Conclusions

The research and personal discussions highlighted in Chapter 3 have, at different stages, strengthened my writing project. Understanding the broader societal context of where my novel may be located, what other published children’s literature and materials including a transgender or non-binary parent already exists, what social research is telling us about family resiliency and the strength of transgender parents, and how audience and language are important when writing a novel about a transgender or non-binary parent, are all aspects I am considering and will continue to consider as I revise future drafts of The Fractured Life of Becca Crease.
Chapter 4: Conclusion and Reflection

When I first began writing *The Fractured Life of Becca Crease*, I didn’t consciously set out to write for an audience of “children who have a transgender or non-binary parent.” However, as my work progressed, I realized there could be many children included in my future readers who have a transgender or non-binary parent, and I became more conscious of the need to ensure that whatever stage they were at, children from such families could see positive themes of family resiliency, love, and acceptance reflected back to them. Similarly, as my readership could include transgender youth, I realized I needed to more thoroughly consider my language choices and how I portrayed relationships within a family where a parent was announcing their (changing) gender identity, so that my work would also resonate with transgender youth.

Writing my novel has been a huge challenge on many levels, and I could not have reached the point I am at today without the support and feedback from many amazing individuals. Moving forward, as I revise my manuscript, my goal will be to trust my instincts and be true to capturing the emotions of a teen grappling with new challenges in her family, while respectfully portraying the relationships I include in my book. Keeping up with societal shifts in understanding gender (including identity and expression), along with its associated language will continue to be important for future drafts. The choices I make for when I set my novel’s time period (currently a few years in the past), may also need to be revisited, given our society’s rapid pace of change regarding gender awareness.

When I find quality children’s books such as *Who are you?* (complete with an interactive “gender identity wheel”) now being published for preschoolers and available in my public library, I am hopeful that with children’s literature, we’re taking another step closer to reducing the misconceptions, biases, and suffering still experienced by many individuals and families within transgender communities and that we can contribute to creating “the world that
needs to be” (Pessin-Whedbee; Pyne 32). Maybe what Pyne has referred to as “a new gender literate generation” will in future mean that the heteronormative family structures and subsequent relationship challenges experienced by the teenaged protagonists in my reference texts, and in The Fractured Life of Becca Crease, will become history. But we still have work to do. For now, perhaps in some small way, my novel and associated research can contribute to greater awareness and dialogue regarding diversity in children’s literature, leading to more diverse publications that fully reflect our society.
Works Cited


