

# I Am J

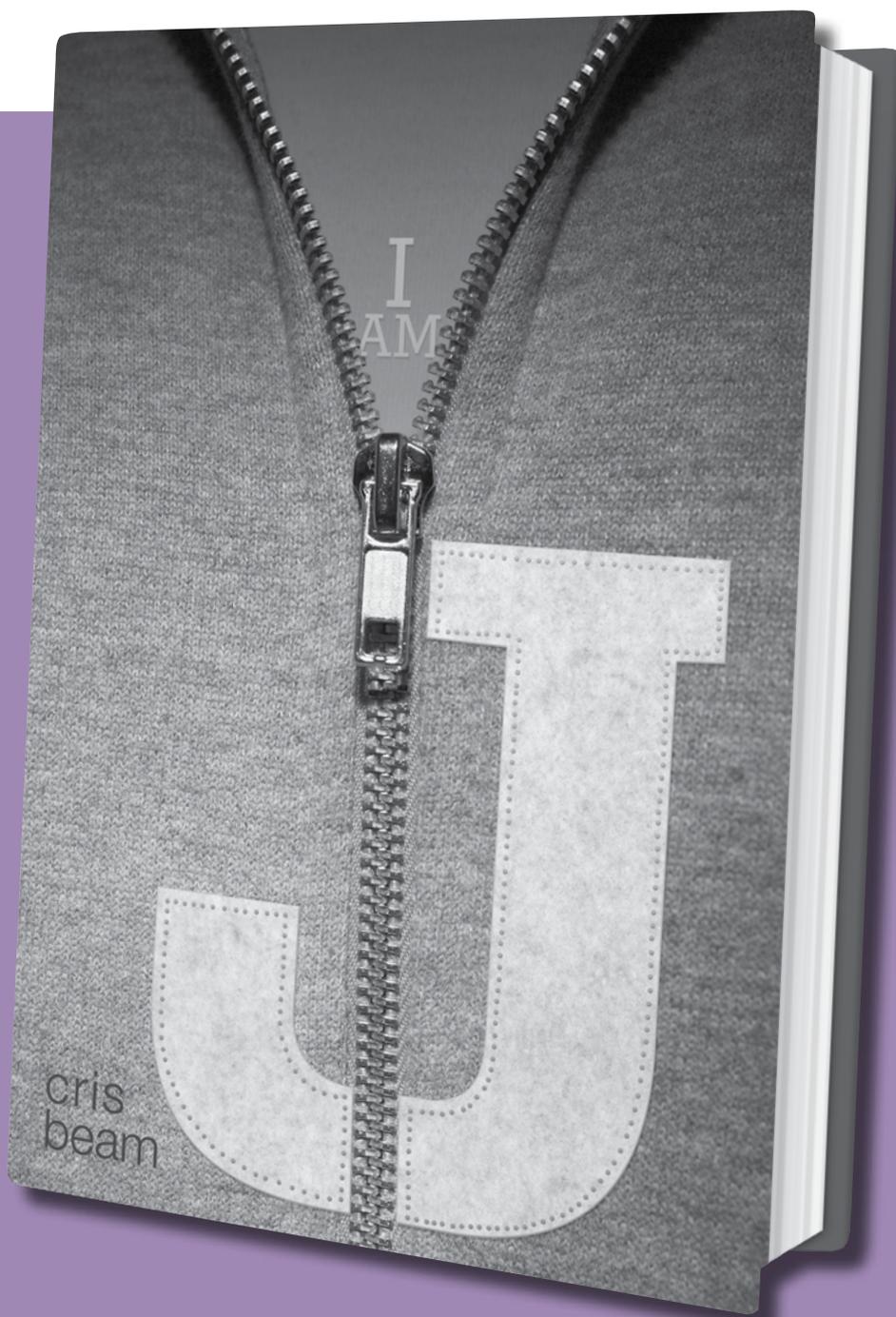
## curriculum connections

- ❖ Transgender Youth
- ❖ GLBTQ Literature
- ❖ Family

Ages: 15 & up

by  
Cris Beam

★ “Finally, a book about a transgender teen that gives its central character a life in which gender and transition matter but do not define his existence!” —*Kirkus*



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe J. What makes him a dynamic character? Is he the type of person you would want to befriend? Why or why not?
2. How would you describe J's family? Are they in any way similar to your own? If so, in what ways?
3. In *I Am J*, fear both motivates and incapacitates J. Consider how he deals with his fears. In what ways does he acknowledge them? Is he able to turn to others for help? What are the consequences of his reactions?
4. What are your earliest impressions of J's best friend, Melissa? Do you find her to be a good friend? Using textual examples, support your position.
5. How would you characterize the relationship between J and Melissa, and how does it change over the course of the novel?
6. Explain the significance of the title, *I Am J*. In what ways does it accurately describe the events and relationships portrayed in the novel?
7. After being attacked on the subway, J vows to become a "genuine freak." Coupled with the constant misunderstandings of his sexuality, how does this experience serve as a catalyst that drives J to reinvent himself?
8. J's mother tells him, "You can learn to love the life you're handed." Do you agree with her assessment? Why or why not?
9. In what ways is J's life similar to Melissa's? How are they different? What are some of the unique challenges faced by each of them? Do you think one has a significantly easier life? Explain your answer.
10. J uses his photography to help make Melissa better understand him. Consider the photograph he stages to share with her; how is this image symbolic of who he is?
11. Compare the parent/child relationships in the story: J and his mother, J and his father, and Melissa and her mother. To what extent are the relationships of these characters shaped by the world around them? To what extent do their relationships shape that world?
12. After a relaxed portrait session with his parents, J thinks, "I want to remember them like this." To what extent do you think J understands how the bond between he and his parents will be changed?
13. In your opinion, does J's new school provide him the support he needs? What are the advantages and disadvantages to attending a nontraditional school?
14. Describe J's relationship with Blue; in what ways are his actions "typical" of a player in a high school romance? What does he ultimately learn from this failed relationship?
15. Throughout the novel, readers witness the complexities of the various relationships among the characters. Consider whose relationship seemed most similar to one of your own personal relationships. What about it reminded you of your experiences?
16. Consider the novel's cover. In what ways is the image symbolic of the events that transpire throughout the course of the book?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

17. Blue tells J, “You’ve probably never wanted to be anything different than what you are.” Given that readers fully understand the irony of her statement, why might Blue have such an opinion of J?
18. J’s obsession with getting on “T” is indicative of his emotional state; do you think he will be satisfied in the end? Why or why not?
19. Consider Melissa’s dancing, Blue’s painting, and Jay’s photography. What role does art play in the lives of each of these characters? In what ways does it allow them to express their vision of their world?
20. Using the phrase, “This is a story about...” supply five words to describe *I Am J*. Explain your choices.

## RESOURCES

### ***Children’s National Medical Center Outreach Program for Children with Gender-Variant Behaviors and Their Families***

A basic primer on gender variance in children.

[www.childrensnational.org/dcchildrens/about/pdf/GenVar.pdf](http://www.childrensnational.org/dcchildrens/about/pdf/GenVar.pdf)

### ***PFLAG—Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays***

PFLAG has a transgender chapter, too.

[www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)

### ***Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)***

[www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)

### ***Gender Education and Advocacy***

GEA is a national organization focused on the needs, issues, and concerns of gender variant people.

[www.gender.org](http://www.gender.org)

### ***Youth Resource***

By and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.

[www.amplifyyourvoice.org/youthresource](http://www.amplifyyourvoice.org/youthresource)

### ***National Youth Advocacy Coalition***

NYAC advocates for and with young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning.

[www.nyacyouth.org](http://www.nyacyouth.org)

### ***Youth Guardian Services***

Safe space online for LGBTQ youth.

[www.youth-guard.org](http://www.youth-guard.org)

***24-hour Suicide Prevention Hotline for GLBTQ Youth 1-866-4-U-TREVOR (1-866-488-7386)***

## about the book



*I Am J*  
by Cris Beam

978-0-316-05361-7

J always felt different. When he was younger, he'd been certain that eventually everyone would understand who he really was: a boy mistakenly born as a girl. Yet as he grew up, his body began to betray him. Eventually, J stopped praying to wake up a “real boy” and started covering up his body, keeping himself invisible—from his family, from his friend... from the world. But after being deserted by the best friend he thought would always be by his side, J decides that he's done hiding—it's time to be who he really is. And this time he his determined not to give up, no matter the cost.

An inspiring story of self-discovery, of choosing to stand up for yourself, and of finding your own path—readers will recognize a part of themselves in J's struggle to love his true self.

## praise for *I Am J*

★ “Finally, a book about a transgender teen that gives its central character a life in which gender and transition matter but do not define his existence!”  
—*Kirkus*

★ “Beam has written easily the best book to date about the complicated condition of being a transsexual teen, not only sharing important information that is artfully woven into the plot but also creating, in J, a multilayered, absolutely believable character whose pain readers will share.”  
—*Booklist*

★ “The novel's greatest strengths are J's voice and his clearly articulated perspective.”  
—*BCCB*

## about the author



Cris Beam is the author of *Transparent*, a Stonewall Honor Book and Lambda Literary Award winner. She has an MFA in writing from Columbia University and teaches creative writing at Columbia, New York University, and The New School. *I Am J* is her debut young adult novel. While living in LA, Cris volunteered at Eagles, a high school for gay and transgender kids. During the 2.5 years Cris taught there, she became deeply involved with a complex but marginalized tribe of transgender teens who had nowhere to go but the streets, one of whom became her foster daughter.



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