



Family Dynamics and Gender Expectations in Charlie Anders *The Choir Boy*

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Abstract

Choir Boy offers a thorough examination of transgender identities and the sociocultural contexts that influence and shape them. The story revolves around a young choirboy named Berry who struggles with gender identity and societal. Apart from being a coming-of-age story, the novel thoroughly examines the complexities of transgender experiences. It illustrates how various environments – family, school, choir, and public spaces – can both support and stifle the path to self-discovery and acceptance. Berry's internal conflict is profound from the outset. His soprano voice, a rare and treasured gift within the choir, is more than a musical talent; it is integral to his sense of self. As puberty approaches, the impending change threatens to strip him of this voice, symbolizing a loss of identity and a forced conformity to traditional male roles. His parents, Marco and Judy, embody conflicting societal attitudes toward gender. Marco's quirky, often dismissive approach and Judy's practical, controlling nature create an environment where Berry feels neither understood nor supported. The lack of a nurturing space within his family intensifies Berry's sense of isolation and internal conflict. This familial tension reflects the societal struggle to accept and validate diverse gender identities. School, another critical sociocultural space, presents additional challenges for Berry.

Key words: Struggle, Complexities, Familial bond, Space.

Charlie Anders skilfully integrates the theme of family dynamics and gender expectations to demonstrate the significant

influence of these factors on Berry's journey with his gender identity. The family, as a primary sociocultural space, exerts significant

influence on Berry's journey, shaping his self-perception and his interactions with the world. The conflicting attitudes and behaviours of Berry's parents, Marco and Judy, represent the societal pressures and expectations surrounding gender, further complicating Berry's quest for self-acceptance.

Berry's father appears whimsical and often dismissive, with little serious engagement in Berry's gender identity. Marco's behaviour oscillates between humorous anecdotes and heavy-handed attempts at guidance, neither of which provides Berry with the support he needs. For example, his taking Berry to a bar and then to a strip bar:

Marco led Berry to a big wooden door with a tiny window in it. ... He ordered two beers and handed one to Berry, who held up the fake ID to the bartender. The bartender barely glanced at it. "After this, we'll go to a strip joint. You're growing," Marco said with a smile... Marco put his hand on his son's shoulder and drew Berry's head into his chest. Berry watched the women dance from under his dad's arm until he fell asleep. Then his dad roused him and they took the bus home. (Anders 49)

This whimsical approach is highlighted in the novel when Marco tries to discuss puberty and gender with Berry using fantastical comparisons: "Oh no, Berry. You should be excited. It's a rite of passage to have your voice change. It's like when a sumo wrestler reaches four hundred pounds or an opera singer grows horns of her own and no longer needs her helmet." (Anders 36-37) Marco's use of humour and fantasy to address serious issues reveals his discomfort and inability to fully grasp the depth of Berry's struggle. His casual dismissal of Berry's fears about losing his soprano voice – "I never lost my voice. See? I'm talking." (Anders 36) – fails to acknowledge the existential dread Berry feels about losing a core part of his identity. This lack of understanding exacerbates

Berry's sense of isolation and his internal conflict, highlighting the inadequacy of Marco's whimsical approach in addressing his son's needs.

Judy's practical but controlling nature is in stark contrast to Marco's whimsical dismissal. Judy embodies the societal pressure to conform to traditional gender norms, exerting a rigid influence over Berry's life. Her expectations are rooted in a desire for Berry to fit into the conventional mould of masculinity, which she believes will ensure his success and acceptance in society. Judy's controlling behaviour is evident in her interactions with Berry, where she often imposes strict rules and expectations.

For a week, his mom had driven him around pointing at people on the street and saying either "Swan" or "Goose." A man in a suit with a cell phone was a Swan, said Judy. The newspaper seller and the guy rooting in the garbage were both Geese. Berry had almost died when Judy had marched him through the mall pointing and barking, "Goose, Goose, Swan, Swan, Goose." (Anders 32)

Judy categorizes people into 'Swan' or 'Goose' based on subjective criteria, illustrating an arbitrary and potentially discriminatory classification system. The juxtaposition of a suited man as a 'Swan' and less affluent individuals as 'Geese' reflects social bias. Berry's distress during the mall incident stresses the discomfort and absurdity of Judy's categorization practice. Her practical approach to parenting, while well-intentioned, fails to recognize Berry's unique identity and the emotional turmoil he experiences. Judy's emphasis on conformity and her inability to accept Berry's nonconformity to gender norms create a stifling environment that hinders Berry's self-discovery.

The lack of genuine support and understanding from both parents creates a profound sense of isolation for Berry. His home, which should be a safe and nurturing space,

becomes another battleground where he must navigate conflicting expectations and misunderstanding. This familial tension mirrors the societal conflict, illustrating how personal and societal pressures intertwine to create a suffocating environment for someone grappling with their gender identity.

Berry's attempts to communicate his fears and desires to his parents often result in frustration and misunderstanding. Marco's whimsical anecdotes and Judy's practical directives leave Berry feeling unheard and invalidated. This lack of effective communication exacerbates Berry's internal conflict, as he struggles to reconcile his own identity with the expectations imposed upon him. Anders captures this struggle in moments of family interaction, such as when Berry tries to discuss his fears with his parents. The conflicting attitudes of Marco and Judy highlight the societal expectations surrounding gender. Marco's whimsical dismissal and Judy's practical control represent two ends of the spectrum of societal attitudes towards gender nonconformity. Together, they create an environment where Berry feels pressured to conform to traditional gender norms, while simultaneously feeling unsupported in his unique identity.

This familial environment significantly impacts Berry's sense of self and his journey towards self-acceptance. The constant pressure to conform, combined with the lack of understanding and support, and intensifies Berry's internal conflict and his fear of losing his identity. The family dynamics portray the crucial role that family support plays in the lives of transgender individuals. Berry's journey is marked by increased psychological strain and a heightened sense of isolation without a supportive and understanding family environment.

The psychological strain that Berry experiences within his family environment leads to moments of profound desperation. The

novel captures these moments, such as when Berry contemplates self-harm as a way to escape the overwhelming pressure he feels:

... a bread knife on the counter caught his eye. He looked at it a long time. The light made its serrations glitter. Berry pulled down his pajama bottoms and hefted the knife. He found the testicles that he'd first noticed a few months earlier and pulled at their nest...Berry sawed until the knife bit skin, then gasped, trying to keep his sobs inaudible to Marco and Judy... As he heard his parents stir and dropped the knife, Berry had two thoughts close together. The first: he'd hit that note, way up the windy scaffolding above everything, that nobody could reach at the end of Stanford's "Te Deum" in C major. The second: Berry had failed the tribal test and wasn't a man. (Anders 41-42)

Despite moments of desperation, Berry's journey also shows resilience and determination. His interactions with friends like Wilson and Lisa provide glimpses of support and understanding, although these relationships are also fraught with complexity. Berry's tenacity to maintain his identity, even in the face of public scrutiny and familial pressure, highlights his inner strength and the courage required to navigate such a hostile terrain.

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