

T M B Y

a graphic memoir by LIZ PRINCE

STUDY GUIDE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction

1. Gender 2. Self-Esteem and Identity 3. Early Relationships

- Conclusion - Relevant Common Core Standards

- *Tomboy* Worksheet

INTRODUCTION

WHAT: *Tomboy* is a memoir about being yourself, even if that self is at odds with our culture's idea of who you should be. Looking back at her childhood through the lens of gender stereotypes, author and artist Liz Prince dissects the ways that our culture can leave a lot of kids feeling like they don't fit in. A mix of honest writing, cute cartooning, and insightful wit makes *Tomboy* accessible and entertaining for all ages.

WHO: Teachers, parents, and leaders of middle schoolers (and up) can use this to guide discussion of *Tomboy* and its themes. *Tomboy* is a story about finally becoming comfortable with our gender and how we fit in with our peers. Even if your students have never questioned their gender, they will be able to connect with the book's discussion of friendship, bullying, and body changes.

WHY: The goal of this study guide is to get young people thinking about how culture reinforces gender stereotypes and, consequently, how that affects our perception and development of identity. It functions as a great tool to get us thinking about where gender stereotypes come from and how they are reinforced.

MAKE YOUR OWN COMIC! The comic form of *Tomboy* obviously provides an avenue for easy discussion about typically heady topics. As your students make their way through the guide, prompts will encourage them to respond creatively to the topics, questions, and discussions. Students will also be encouraged to draw comics (see worksheet at the end of this study guide) of their own and keep a journal, much like how several passages in *Tomboy* were made up of Liz's journal entries from junior high and high school. In the end, they'll have created their own small comic, much like *Tomboy*! (Using consistent paper sizes, like a standard piece of printer paper folded in half, will also make the final zine that much easier to create.) Hopefully students will discover the empowerment of writing about their own experiences.

1. GENDER

DISCUSS IN SMALL GROUPS OR AS A CLASS:

1. In the early chapters of the book, Liz feels most comfortable wearing clothes and playing with toys that are “meant for boys.” Have you ever been made fun of because you were participating in an activity considered outside of your gender? Conversely, have you ever made fun of someone for doing something you perceived to be outside of their gender? Has someone’s opinion of you ever made you stop doing something you liked, just so you wouldn’t be made fun of anymore?
2. Liz doesn’t feel like she fits in with other girls because she’s never known or been presented with any girls like her (girls that dress and act “more like boys”). What are some ways that the kinds of girls you see on TV and in movies shape the way you expect girls to look and behave?
3. Throughout the book Liz feels at odds with her femininity, because she is constantly shown ways that she fails at being a girl. If you are a girl, what are some of the beauty standards that you have noticed in your life? Do they affect you? If you are a boy, are there ways that you reinforce those beauty standards with the girls that you interact with?
4. At one point in the book, Liz talks about the ways in which she believed that girls were weaker than boys, in relation to way the boys on her baseball team were unhappy with having her as a teammate. Where in media do you recognize this idea that women are not as capable as men? Do you believe that media’s representation of women is fair? Why or why not?

SMALL GROUP ASSIGNMENT: We all use stereotypes on some level. As a group, discuss times in which you might have assumed something about a person based on a stereotype. Discuss times in which you felt like someone might have been stereotyping you. Once we can recognize stereotypes, are there ways that they are useful, or are they always harmful? Present your conclusions to the class or group.

JOURNAL ACTIVITY: Write a short essay about your gender, what your gender means to you. Think about the ways in which gender is part of your identity, and how you reflect that. Are there ways in which your gender helps you? Are there ways in which your gender hinders you? Explain both.

COMIC ASSIGNMENT: Draw yourself, pointing out the ways in which you either adhere to or diverge from typical gender expectations. See Liz’s examples of portraits, how she points out specific clothing articles and accessories to explain who she is.

2. SELF-ESTEEM / IDENTITY

DISCUSS IN SMALL GROUPS OR AS A CLASS:

1. The clothes we wear are often used to visually represent our identities to the world; what is your favorite outfit and why? What do you think your favorite outfit says about you? Do you think there are stereotypes about the ways you dress that apply to you? What about ones that do not?
2. Do you feel like you have good self esteem? How so? Do you feel like you have bad self esteem? How so? Do you think it’s possible to have good and bad self esteem at the same time?
3. Everyone has things about themselves that they are ashamed of, but a lot of people don’t take the time to investigate why. Think about an aspect of yourself that you try to hide, and try to figure out why it is something you’re ashamed of. Is it because you feel like no one acts or feels that way? Is it because you’ve been told that it’s bad or wrong to act or feel that way? Is it because you feel like others wouldn’t understand?
4. Liz felt like an outcast because she didn’t have any tomboy role models, but once she found some, she realized that a lot of people felt like her. Do you think you have role models that affirm your identity? If so, does that make you more confident in yourself? If not, are you confident in yourself anyway?

JOURNAL ACTIVITIES:

1. List five positive things about yourself. A lot of times negative thoughts take priority over positive thoughts, so take time out to take pride in some of the things that you think are best about yourself!
2. Write a diary entry about when you feel like you discovered your identity. If you haven't discovered your identity yet, write about why.
3. Keep a diary of your esteem for the week, and update it daily, with how you felt about yourself that day and why. Were outside factors affecting you? Were you bullied? Were you having a great day? Outside factors have a real effect on your inner life: chronicle them in your journal entries.

COMIC ASSIGNMENT: Draw a 6-panel biography of your life up to now, and include the 6 things you think are most essential to your identity. This is your chance to show who you really are in 6 easy drawings!

3. EARLY RELATIONSHIPS

DISCUSS IN SMALL GROUPS OR AS A CLASS:

1. *Tomboy* discusses the flux and fragility of school friendships: are you still friends with the same people you were in elementary school? If so, how are some ways that you have both grown together? If not, what are the reasons you drifted apart?
2. Liz felt like her friendships and romantic relationships suffered because of societal enforcement of gender expectations; have you ever felt like your own friendships suffered in such a way? Explain why.
3. Once we reach a certain age, male/female friendships begin to take on a certain romantic expectation. In what ways is it harmful to assume a boy and girl spending time together must be romantic?
4. Liz spent a lot of time believing that boys wouldn't like her because she didn't fit the culturally reinforced idea of what is attractive in girls: list some ways that beauty standards have impacted your life (beauty standards apply to men as well, but they aren't usually called that).

SMALL GROUP ASSIGNMENT: On a sheet of paper, write down what you think the most important quality of a friendship is. As a group, display your desired friendship qualities, and discuss them. You may find that everyone has a different idea of what is most important in a friendship; given that do you think that it is better to be friends with people who hold the same values as you, or is it better to be friends with people who challenge your opinions with viewpoints that differ from your own?

JOURNAL ACTIVITY: Write about the friends you saw this week and how your interactions with them went. Were you having fun? Were you studying together? Was there drama? Dissect your social interactions with your friends from your specific point of view.

COMIC ASSIGNMENT: Draw a portrait of your best friend, and explain in the bullet-point style utilized in *Tomboy*, why this person is important to you. Write about a time that they supported you with their friendship.



CONCLUSION

Hello! Liz Prince here. A lot of people have asked me why I felt it was important to write a book like *Tomboy*, and the simplest answer is because gender stereotyping has been an important issue that has affected my life from childhood through adulthood. I'd never seen a graphic novel that tackled the topic directly, and I was hoping that by telling my own story, others would find things to relate to. I hope that *Tomboy* promotes discussion of gender issues, but I also hope that it shows teens how they can talk about the issues that are important to their life through personal narrative; whether or not it is gender related, shared life experiences can create greater awareness of social issues. Is there a social issue that is important to you? Let others know about it! I hope *Tomboy* has empowered you to speak out about the things that matter in your life.

BONUS ZINE PROJECT: By the time you have completed this study guide, your students should have several journal entries, essays, drawings and comics about themselves, their experiences with gender, and their identities. Encourage your students to put their assignments together in the form of a zine. We learn a little about zines from *Tomboy*: they are self-published magazines ("zine" is the shortened form of "magazine") that are usually laid out by hand and photocopied. "Perzines" are "Personal zines", which means that they are zines that are about the author's own experience: much of Liz's self-published comics are considered perzines. If your students compile their assignments into a book, they will have their very own perzine, which they can trade to the other students in the class. Students can pick and choose which assignments they would like to include, especially if they feel that some of the projects are too personal.



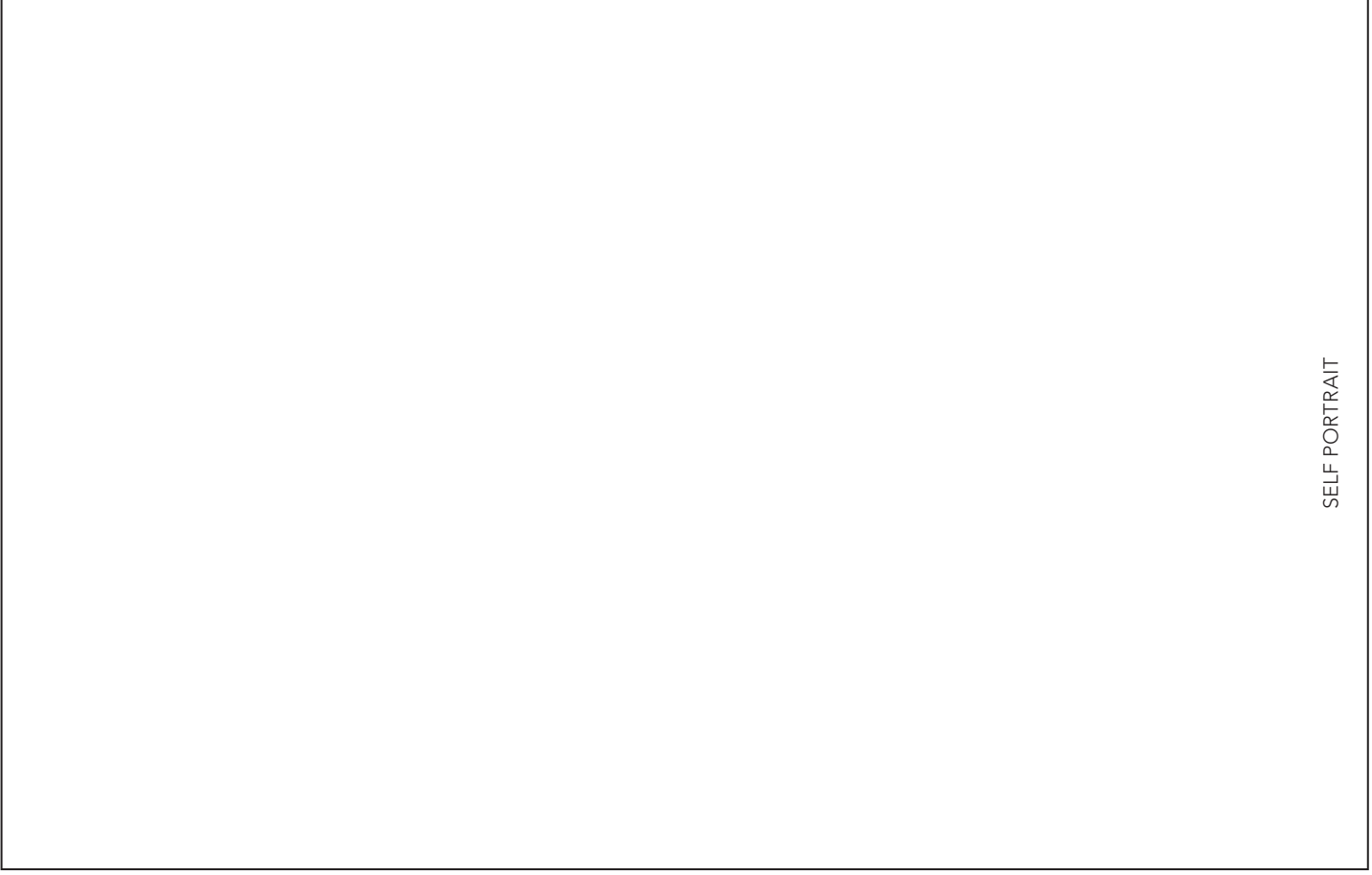
RELEVANT COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA – Introduction: Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures by reading and listening, and they are able to communicate with people of varied backgrounds.

CCSS.ELA – Literacy.SL.6.2: Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

CCSS.ELA – Literacy.W.7.3a: Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.

CCSS.ELA – Literacy.CCRA.R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, introducing visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.



SELF PORTRAIT

.... FOLD ALONG DOTTED LINE — INSTANT MINICOMIC!



PORTRAIT OF A FRIEND

THE SIX-PANEL CHALLENGE!

Use this space to draw a six-panel biography of your life up to now. This is your chance to show who you really are in six easy drawings!

DIY COMIC SPACE!

Here's your chance to make up your own rules and tell your own story your own way. This comic is what you make of it.