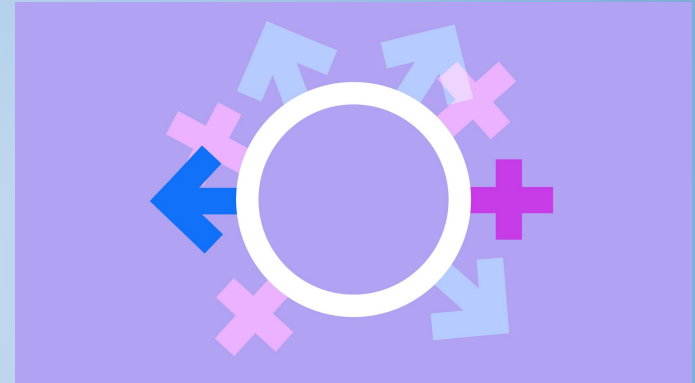


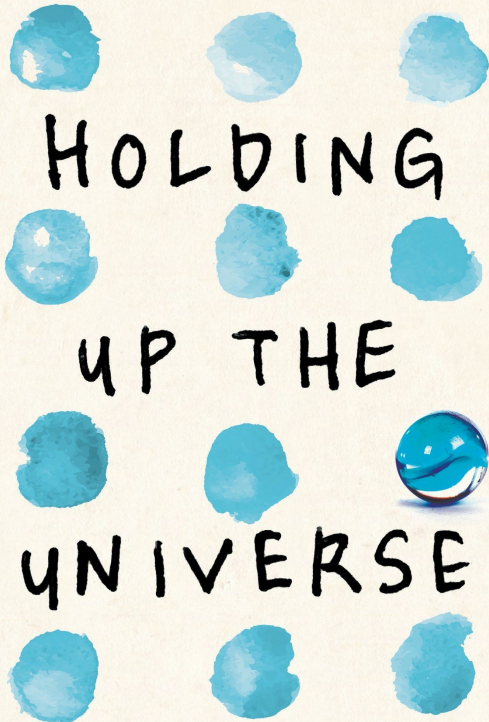
Exploring Gender as it relates to “Holding up the Universe” by Jennifer Niven

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JENNIFER NIVEN

Author of All the Bright Places



A New York Times Bestseller

Summary

“Holding Up the Universe” follows two characters, Libby Strout and Jack Masselin, as they navigate the cruelty of high school and expectations set forth by their peers. Alternating narrators every chapter, the reader gets a unique insight into the characters’ struggles with the stereotypes they are expected to fit. Libby is returning to school after being homeschooled due to depression and anxiety that followed being bullied and the death of her mother. Jack is struggling with hiding his prosopagnosia from his peers and his knowledge of his father’s affair. Their paths collide after Jack attempts to save Libby from a cruel prank and ends up making the situation significantly worse.

“And the way he says it makes me want to buy him every goddamn purse in the world and start carrying one myself out of solidarity”.

- Jack Masselin

(Niven, 118)

Jack Masselin

Stereotypes and Public Perception

- “ladies man”
 - has an on and off relationship with Caroline Lushamp
- arrogant and cocky
 - doesn't acknowledge others in the school hallways, doesn't remember the names of classmates or friends
- bystander and bully
 - played “Fat Girl Rodeo” with Libby in the cafeteria in front of the entire school, didn't intervene when friends bullied others

Stereotypes and Personal Life

- “ladies man”
 - relies on Caroline to help him recognize others, as his prosopagnosia means that he cannot recognize anyone and he doesn't want anyone to know about his struggles, he needs her in order to survive
 - resents the bully that Caroline has become
- arrogant and cocky
 - has to rely on other cues to identify others, can't even recognize family members and close friends
 - intentionally acts arrogant so people just think he's a mean person, not that he literally cannot recognize them
- bystander and bully
 - thought that he would save Libby from being assaulted further by his friends if he did it
 - explained to Libby immediately after why he did it
 - gains the courage to stand up for others against his friends in the future, gets into fights in order to protect others
 - encourages his younger brother to carry his purse if that makes him happy

Analysis

On the surface level, Jack very much appears to be a stereotypical teenage boy. He tries to maintain a character of general aloofness and disinterest in order to protect himself from revealing that he suffers from a disorder that makes him unable to recognize others' faces. He maintains his on and off again relationship because his girlfriend protects him and recognizes others for him. His friends and family accept the protections he encompasses himself in as part of his personality, and when Jack eventually stands up to his friends on the behalf of those that they are bullying, they are all shocked that he could ever do such a thing.

The gender stereotypes that Jack encompasses are fairly typical for YA books. These stereotypes make it easy for the most common romance tropes to occur and do not tend to be questioned because of how prevalent and normalized they are. This book did a good job of combatting the stereotype by showing the multiple dimensions of Jack's character and I believe it would be helpful in showing middle school students that it's okay not to subscribe to stereotypes.

The stereotypes that Jack portrays are often reinforced by other characters. Jack does a very good job of playing into the stereotypes, and therefore is surrounded by people who actually embody these stereotypes. This creates an environment where Jack inadvertently progresses further into the mean side of these stereotypes, as exemplified by Jack's participation in 'Fat Girl Rodeo', where he thought he was helping Libby but he just made her more miserable. However, by hearing Jack's internal monologue and his justifications for his actions, he helps change the social construction of gender because he shows the audience his caring and nurturing side. Where his character could have just been a mean person who fits the typical image of a teenage boy, Jack turns out to be a kind individual who stands up for the bullied.

Analysis Continued

The gender stereotypes that I see most frequently reinforced by characters in books typically have to do with the male protagonist being the strongest character and the female protagonist still being strong, but visibly less strong than the male. In particular, one trope that is frequent that I hate is when the woman is harmed so that the man can really shift into gear. The frequency of sexual assault, murder, etc. against a woman for a man's character development is shockingly common. Authors write as if a man can't feel passionate about restoring justice unless he has been personally wronged, a trope that connects to the stereotype of men being emotionally detached. According to most literature, men don't have the ability to be empathetic to victims of injustice, and only a strong personal connection will result in them feeling angry.

Recently, I have noticed that gender stereotypes as they relate to employment are becoming more and more challenged by characters in books. I believe this is because our society as a whole is progressing in the direction of equality when it comes to employment and what jobs are considered a man's and what jobs are considered a woman's. However, I also believe that these stereotypes are the 'easiest' for authors to challenge, so authors can write about a stay-at-home dad without facing backlash from those who are less progressive, whereas if they chose to write about a very feminine male character they would be more likely to receive criticism.

I wish that YA books didn't put emphasis on gender at all. It's very obvious when authors write characters with the intention of making them break stereotypes, which makes them lose their authenticity. Instead of writing about a woman who breaks every single stereotype, they could write about a hero character who happens to be a woman, so if stereotypes are broken they are broken in an authentic way.