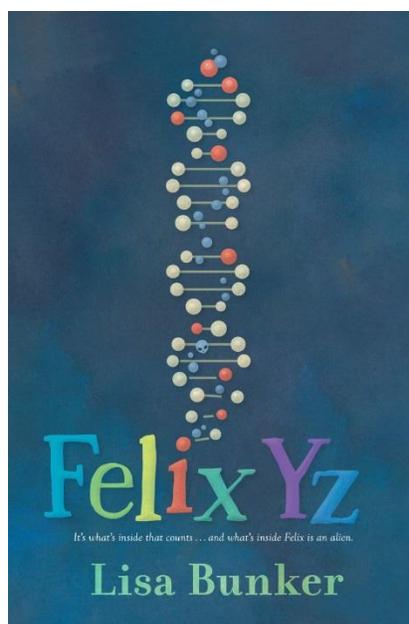




DISCUSSION & ACTIVITY GUIDE



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BACKGROUND

“If it wasn’t for the fused-with-Zyx thing, I suppose I would just be normal—whatever that means.”

When Felix Yz was three years old, a hyperintelligent fourth-dimensional being became fused inside him after one of his father’s science experiments went terribly wrong. The creature is friendly, but Felix—now thirteen—won’t be able to grow to adulthood while they’re still melded together. So a risky Procedure is planned to separate them . . . but it may end up killing them both instead.

This book is Felix’s secret blog, a chronicle of the days leading up to the Procedure. Some days it’s business as usual—time with his close-knit family, run-ins with a bully at school, anxiety about his crush. But life becomes more out of the ordinary with the arrival of an Estonian chess Grandmaster, the revelation of family secrets, and a train-hopping journey. When it all might be over in a few days, what matters most?

Told in an unforgettable voice full of heart and humor, Felix Yz is a groundbreaking story about how we are all separate, but all connected too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Bunker has written stories all her life. Before setting up shop as a full-time author and trans activist she had a 30-year career in non-commercial broadcasting, most recently as Program Director of the community radio station in Portland, Maine. Besides Maine she has made homes in New Mexico, southern California, Seattle, and the Florida panhandle. She lives in Exeter, New Hampshire with her partner and her cat. She has two grown children. When not writing she reads, plays piano, knits, takes long walks, does yoga, and studies languages.



PRAISE FOR *FELIX YZ*

“Acutely perceptive, disarmingly witty, devastatingly honest, and utterly captivating. Joyful, heartbreaking, completely bonkers, and exuberantly alive.”

—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

“Felix’s humor, vulnerability, and strength give this story its big heart, which is rounded out by a loving family that includes Felix’s mother, piano prodigy older sister, and genderfluid grandparent...Set against a countdown to the unknown, Felix’s story is a love letter to anyone who feels out of place and a testament to the beauty of being ‘different.’”

—Publishers Weekly, starred review

“Containing eye-opening diversity...the story provides an original take on classic themes of family acceptance and middle-grade love. There are plenty of laughs to be had in this lovable debut. Bunker is an author to watch.”

—Booklist

“Perfectly straddles the contemplative tone of an introspective teen with the futuristic view of a contemporary world.”

—BCCB

“A one-of-a-kind story...Like the sweet older brother of middle grade series such as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries*, this title, with its combination of light sci-fi and relatable stakes, should appeal to younger teens.”

—School Library Journal

“If you think a boy with an alien inside of him doesn’t have a whole lot to teach you about life and love and the ways we are connected to each other, then you’ve never met Felix Yz. Felix would be wholly original even if he didn’t have an alien inside of him—which is part of the beauty and awe of this book. Between Felix and Zyx and family secrets and chess and that fated first crush feeling, Lisa Bunker shows us all the subtle ways we are connected and what it means to risk everything, just by being ourselves.”

—Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock, author of the Morris Award Finalist of *The Smell of Other People’s Houses*



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What role does school play in Felix's life? What effect does the attention (both positive and negative) of teachers have on him?
2. Felix has trouble with a bully at school. Consider how the relationship with the bully eventually plays out. What does this story arc teach us about bullying?
3. Being fused with Zyx makes it hard for Felix to move and talk. He is, in effect, disabled. What role do Felix's alien-caused physical challenges play in the story?
4. Felix has a running joke about "normal – whatever that means." How does the concept of "normal" play out in the story? What does "normal" mean, anyway?
5. Felix has a loving but sometimes fractious relationship with his sister, Bea. How do sibling dynamics contribute to the arc of Felix's story?
6. The game of chess plays an important role in this story. Chess is much less popular in the US than many other competitive sports and games. How would the story have been different if the author had chosen a more mainstream sport or game?
7. Grandy, Felix's grandparent, lives as a woman half the time and as a man half the time. What does Grandy's fluid gender identity add to the story?
8. The alien, Zyx, is specifically written to be as unlike humans as possible. What other characters have you encountered in stories you know that are specifically other than human? How does the non-humanness of these characters play out in the stories they're in?



DIGGING DEEPER

Many thanks to Mary Ann Capiello for developing these. Her original version for The Classroom Bookshelf, a School Library Journal blog, is [here](#).

Countdowns. Felix writes his blog while counting down the days until his “Procedure.” This countdown provides an overall structure for the book. How have other story-makers used the countdown structure in stories you know? Try practicing this literary technique yourself by writing a countdown story. How does the time structure support your writing and plotting? How does it restrict the process?

Traveling through Dimensions. Compare and contrast Felix’s experiences with the fourth dimension with those of other literary characters, for example, Meg Murry from *A Wrinkle in Time*. Use these stories as a springboard for conversations about spatial dimensions beyond the three we know.

Identity. Felix *literally* has an alien being inside of him. But what are some of the ways that Zyx could be read as a metaphor? Explore the different ways that Zyx can represent the multitude of identities that we all have inside of us. Towards the end of the novel, Zyx reveals some of the sacrifices he has made in order to keep Felix alive. In what ways do we sacrifice some parts of our identity for other aspects of our identity? Talk/write about previous identities you have shed as you have gotten older.

Pronouns and Gender. This story features new gender-neutral pronouns invented by the author: vo (he/she), ven (him/her), veir (his/her), veirs (his/hers), veirself (himself/herself). Track your responses to these pronouns as you read. Do they throw you off? How long does it take you to get used to them? To what extent do you think about pronoun usage in your life? Consider trying to use these pronouns (or others of your own invention) for a week. Then discuss ways in which the experiment causes you to think differently about gender and language.

HELPFUL LINKS

Thanks again to Mary Ann Capiello for coming up with most of the entries on this list.

[“The Brainy Benefits of Chess,” Parents, 2001](#)

[“Checkmate, Human: How Computers Got So Good at Chess,” Popular Mechanics, 2016](#)

[Fourth Dimension Explained by a High School Student, YouTube](#)

[“A History of Aliens and UFOs in Pop Culture,” Popular Mechanics, 2009](#)

[“NASA Announces Results of Epic Space-Time Experiment,” NASA Science](#)

[“The Singular, Gender Neutral “They” Added to the Associated Press Stylebook,” The Washington Post, 2017](#)

[Transgender FAQ, GLAAD](#)



AUTHOR Q&A

Q: Felix started out as a NaNoWriMo. What is that, and why is it so cool?

A: NaNoWriMo is short for National Novel Writing Month. Every November, hundreds of thousands of people all over the world challenge themselves to write a 50,000-word rough draft of a novel in 30 days. Participants track their progress on a website and get pep talks and support, and there's a wonderful sense of communal effort. I found it to be the perfect combination of working alone, which I have to do when I'm writing, and feeling like I was part of a team, which helped me actually finish.

Q: In your first draft, Felix had a crush on a girl. In the final version, he has a crush on a boy. How did that change happen?

A: While I was writing the first draft I was most fascinated by the challenges of inventing a really unconventional alien, of creating a loving portrait of a tight-knit quirky nerdy family, and the whole threeness of things theme that runs through the book. I knew I wanted Felix to have a crush, but in that draft I just relied on conventional tropes. But then when I was rewriting, my eldest child, Cy, who uses they/them pronouns, remarked that there still weren't enough stories in the world in which there were LGBTQ characters without that being the preachy point, and I had my lightbulb moment and went back and changed the gender of his love-interest.

Q: Was it a hard change to make?

A: No, actually. A few physical description things, of course, but otherwise, all I had to do to make it feel right was make the romance more clandestine. And while I was at it, I changed the gender of his mom's love interest too.

Q: You mentioned the challenge of inventing a really unconventional alien.

A: Uh-huh. There's an enormous amount of cliché about aliens. We get a lot of either gentle bald almond-eyed creatures coming in peace, or ugly scary monsters who want to subjugate the human race. There's also a lot of convenient imagining where, for example, the aliens somehow already speak English, and can breathe our atmosphere, and so on. I wanted to imagine something weirder. So, Zyx is an entity who, until becoming fused with Felix, had no physical body, no language, no sense of self apart from a larger collective, and whose personality could perhaps be described as Zen master infused with a big dose of childlike geeky glee.

Q: Could you talk a bit more about the close-knit nerdy family thing?

A: Happily. I grew up in one such family, and I was a parent in another. I've always loved how language existed in those households. We had so many made-up terms and running jokes and ongoing word games that it amounted to a private language. And I think the bonds that form around sharing love of created things – stories, music, art, movies, whatever – are incredibly powerful. Parenting by nerdy joy and fandom.



Q: What about the threeness of things?

A: To the extent that I have a religious philosophy that can be stated in words, the threeness of things is it. I am fascinated by the idea of dynamic, creative tension between opposites – infinite/finite, self/other, time/space, feminine/masculine. In the human sphere it seems to me that over and over you have two end points, which are pure as ideas but don't actually exist in the world, and then what's actually real happens in the in-between places. And in this model, truth turns out to be this elusive thing flitting around in the middle that you can never quite capture.

Q: How does being transgender affect your writing?

A: For me being trans and being a writer are tied up together. By the time I was five, I already knew that I was both...although actually asserting both in the world took a while longer. And both, for me, are intertwined with the central threeness puzzle of self vs. other. In my writing I try to express elusive human threeness-truths through plot and character and language—through storytelling. And in my gender work I attempt to present my elusive human threeness-self to the world, outside of the unreal poles of the gender binary. Does that sound pretentious?

Q: Maybe, but it makes sense to me.

A: Thanks.

Q: This is fun, being your own interviewer, isn't it?

A: Yes. I get to ask myself the questions I really want to answer.

Q: It's a little weird, though, don't you think?

A: Yeah, maybe a little. But I think that's part of being a writer. It's our job to explore as many different odd out-of-the-way corners of imagination and language as we can and then construct curious machines there and paint everything different colors and yodel and dance and spray perfume around and just play.

