

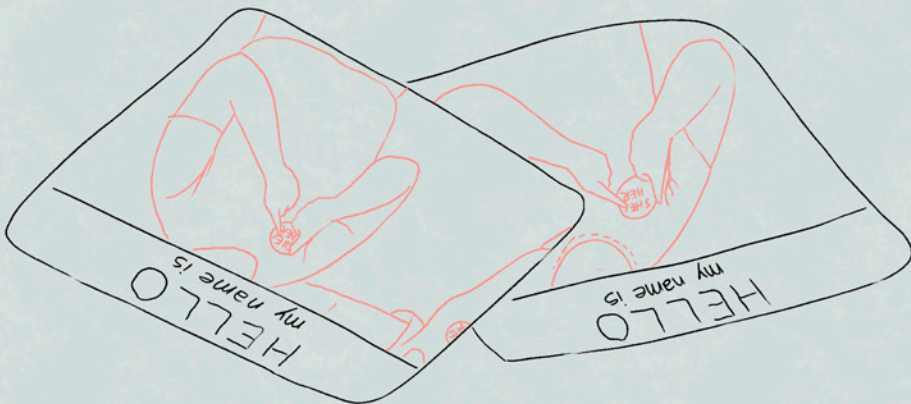
Reprinted with permission from *Special Topics in Being a Human: A Queer and Tender Guide to Things I've Learned the Hard Way about Caring For People, Including Myself* written by S. Bear Bergman and illustrated by Saul Freedman-Lawson (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021).

<https://arsenalpulp.com/Books/S/Special-Topics-in-Being-a-Human>

12



HOW TO GET SOMEONE'S
NEW NAME AND/OR
PRONOUNS RIGHT,
EVERY TIME, SOONER
THAN YOU THINK



FOR TRANS AND NONBINARY PEOPLE, NAMES AND PRONOUNS ARE SO IMPORTANT.

SHALL I BE MORE CLEAR? MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH IMPORTANT. FOR REAL, TRANS PEOPLE'S RATE OF SUICIDALITY AND DEPRESSION DROPPED 42% WHEN PEOPLE CONSISTENTLY USED THE RIGHT NAME AND PRONOUN FOR THEM.^①



THEY'RE ONE OF THE FIRST WAYS WE — AS TRANS/NONBINARY PEOPLE — CAN ASSERT OUR IDENTITIES.



THEY'RE ONE OF THE BEST WAYS FOR YOU, AS A NON-TRANS (OR CISGENDER, WHICH MEANS THE SAME THING) PERSON, TO SHOW YOUR LOVE AND SUPPORT FOR US.

^① RUSSELL, S.T. PH.D. (2018). CHOSEN NAME USE IS LINKED TO REDUCED DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS, SUICIDAL IDEATION, AND SUICIDAL BEHAVIOR AMONG TRANSGENDER YOUTH. JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH, 63(4), 503.

OVER AND OVER, THOUGH, WHEN I TELL PEOPLE THIS, I HEAR A LOT ABOUT THEIR ANXIETY AND FEAR. IT SOUNDS LIKE:

I KEEP FORGETTING!



IT'S REALLY HARD.



I'VE KNOWN THEM SO LONG!



THEY DON'T LOOK LIKE A (BOY/GIRL/ ETC.) TO ME...



IT'S NOT CORRECT GRAMMAR.



YOU CAN'T MAKE ME!



FOR YOU, MY FRIENDS, I HAVE A THREE-STEP METHOD THAT WILL MAKE YOU 99% PERFECT ON SOMEONE'S NEW NAME AND PRONOUN WITHIN SIX MONTHS IF YOU DO IT EVERY TIME. READY?

MAYBE YOU'RE NOT READY, IN YOUR FEELINGS, TO ACCEPT A NEW NAME OR PRONOUN. MAYBE YOU'RE NOT READY TO HAVE YOUR FRIEND, FAMILY MEMBER, OR COLLEAGUE DO SOMETHING YOU HAVE ZERO FAMILIARITY WITH OR MAYBE YOU'RE JUST NOT READY TO GRAPPLE WITH YOUR OWN FEELINGS ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS FOR SOMEONE YOU KNOW TO BE TRANS. LET ME ASSURE YOU THAT ① YOUR FEELINGS ARE VALID, AND ② YOU CANNOT STOP SOMEONE FROM ENGAGING IN A PROCESS OF TRANSITION BY REFUSING TO ACKNOWLEDGE THEM. YOU CAN ONLY ALIENATE THE PERSON AND MAKE THEM FEEL AWFUL ABOUT THEMSELVES AND YOU. PLEASE DON'T DO THAT. DO THIS INSTEAD; IT'S WAY BETTER.

1. HOLD YOURSELF ACCOUNTABLE ALL THE TIME.

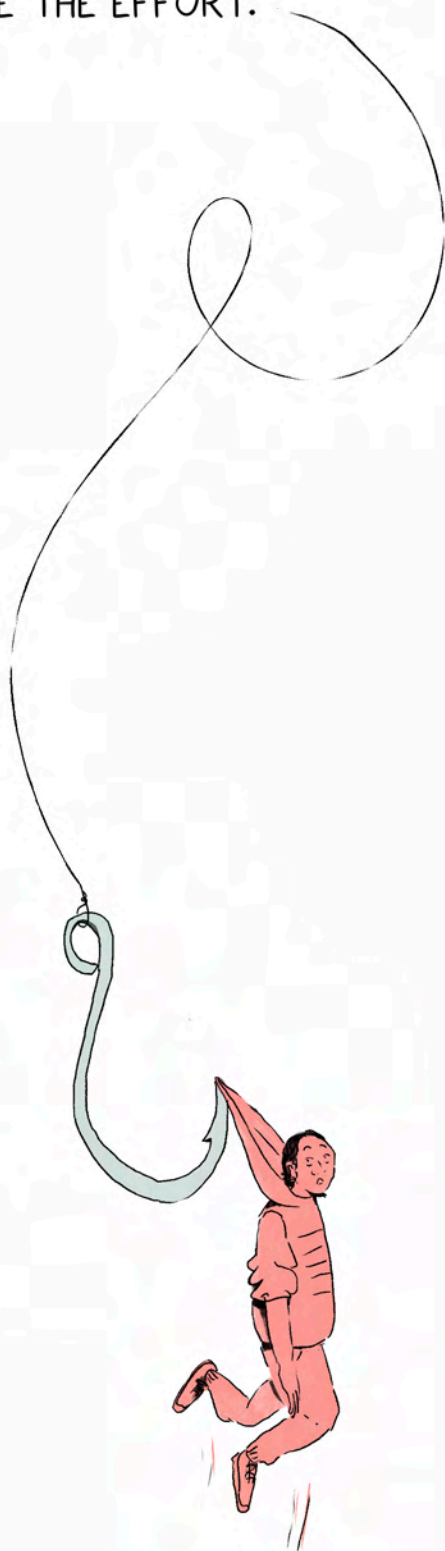
USE THE PERSON'S RIGHT NAME AND PRONOUN ALL THE TIME, WHETHER THEY CAN HEAR YOU OR NOT. IT'S COMMON FOR PEOPLE TO TRY WHEN THEIR FRIEND OR LOVED ONE IS RIGHT THERE TO HEAR THEM —



— BUT OTHERWISE THEY LET THEMSELVES OFF THE HOOK.



GET BACK ON THE HOOK, AND STAY THERE.
MAKE THE EFFORT.



IF YOU USE THE WRONG NAME OR PRONOUN, APOLOGIZE AND CORRECT YOURSELF. SAYING THE RIGHT THING OUT LOUD, EVERY TIME YOU MAKE A MISTAKE, OVERWRITES THE ERROR AND HELPS YOU RETAIN IT FOR THE NEXT TIME.



IF SOMEONE CORRECTS YOU, SAY "THANK YOU" AND THEN THE RIGHT THING.



EVEN IF SCOTT IS OUT OF THE ROOM AND WOULD NEVER KNOW. YOU'RE TRAINING YOUR BRAINS HERE, NOT SCOTT'S.

NOTE:

THIS APOLOGY IS NOT THE TIME YOU TO SHARE WHY YOU THINK YOU MADE A MISTAKE —

~~I'M NOT USED TO IT YET!~~

~~MAYBE IF YOU DRESSED MORE... LADYLIKE.~~

— AND IT'S NOT THE TIME FOR YOU TO FALL FACE-FIRST INTO YOUR FEELINGS AND REQUIRE COMFORT. JUST SAY:

SORRY,
I MEAN
SCOTT.

AND KEEP TALKING ABOUT SCOTT.

2. ASK OTHER PEOPLE TO HOLD YOU ACCOUNTABLE TOO.

TELL EVERYONE YOU KNOW THAT THIS IS SOMETHING YOU'RE WORKING ON. ASK THEM TO PLEASE CORRECT YOU IF YOU MAKE A MISTAKE. SO WHEN YOU'RE CHATTING AWAY ABOUT SIGURÖUR AND HOW MUCH YOU HOPE THEY CAN COME TO GAME NIGHT THURSDAY AND SAY,



AND THEN KEEP GOING.



AND NOW, A HEARTWARMING STORY TO KEEP YOU GOING TO STEP 3!

WHEN OUR FOUR-YEAR-OLD SON'S BELOVED BABYSITTER CHANGED HIS NAME, WE WONDERED HOW LONG IT WOULD TAKE HIM, AT FOUR, TO MOVE THROUGH THESE SAME STEPS AND USE THE RIGHT NAME AND PRONOUN EVERY TIME. WE ALL AGREED TO GENTLY AND LOVINGLY CORRECT HIM AND KEEP HIM ACCOUNTABLE EVERY TIME. HOW LONG DID IT TAKE?

FIVE WEEKS.

SO I'M BETTING YOU CAN DO IT IN SIX TIMES THAT LONG. I BELIEVE IN YOU!



3. PRACTICE IF YOU FEEL NERVOUS.

MAYBE YOU KNOW YOU'RE STILL NOT GETTING IT RIGHT ALL THE TIME, AND IT MAKES YOU FEEL NERVOUS OR ANXIOUS. MAYBE FEELING NERVOUS OR ANXIOUS SCRAMBLES YOUR BRAINS FURTHER. SO BEFORE YOU GO SEE OR SPEAK WITH SOMEONE, PRACTICE! SAY IT OUT LOUD, EVEN IF YOU HAVE TO WHISPER:



(MX. IS PRONOUNCED LIKE MIX! A GENDER-NONSPECIFIC HONORIFIC, EQUIVALENT TO MR. OR MS.)

THAT'S REALLY ALL IT TAKES. IF YOU DO THOSE THREE THINGS EVERY SINGLE TIME FOR SIX MONTHS, BY THE END YOU WILL SAY THE CORRECT NAME AND PRONOUN 99% OF THE TIME. AND YOUR TRANS OR NONBINARY FRIEND, COLLEAGUE, CLIENT, OR FAMILY MEMBER WILL FEEL LOVED AND/OR SUPPORTED. WHICH IS WHAT WE WANT, RIGHT?

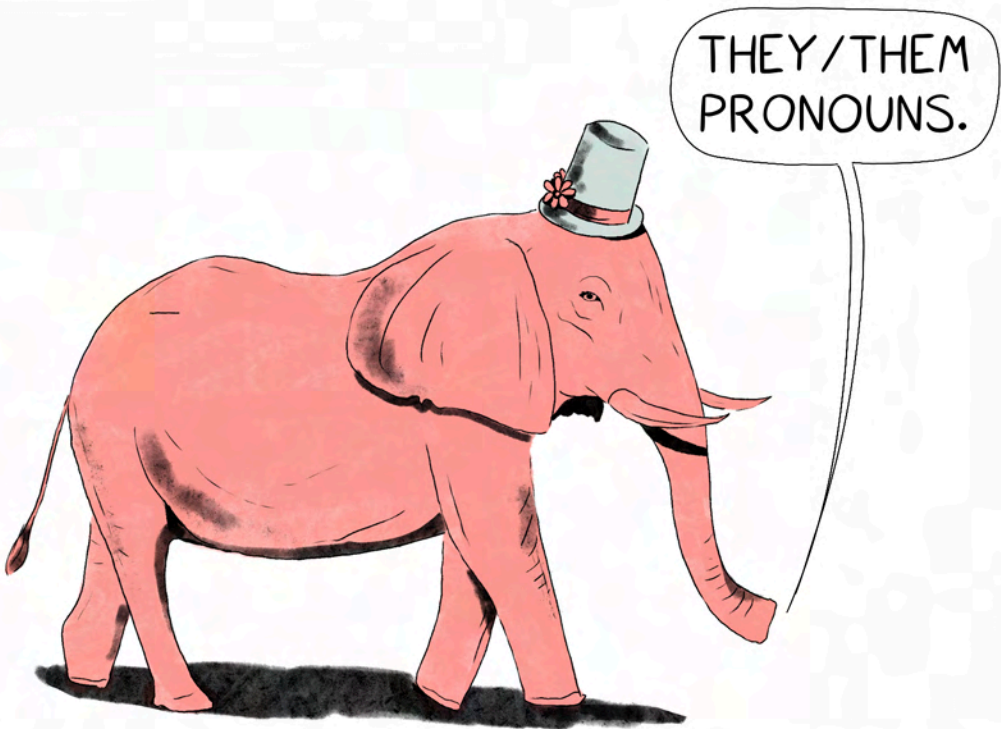
RIGHT.

ALSO, GO AHEAD AND PUT YOUR CORRECT PRONOUNS ON YOUR EMAIL SIGNATURE, TWITTER BIO, AND NAME TAG EVEN IF NO ONE EVER, EVER, MISPRONOUNS YOU. IT MAKES ROOM FOR OTHER PEOPLE, AND THAT'S LOVELY.



BONUS PAGE! WINNER!

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE PINK ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM:




THEY/THEM PRONOUNS MIGHT NOT BE WHAT YOU'RE USED TO. PLEASE ALLOW ME TO OFFER YOU THREE POSSIBLE FRAMES ON THIS TOPIC. PICK THE ONE THAT'S MOST RESONANT AND USE IT TO HELP YOU MAKE THEY/THEM PRONOUNS REAL AND VALID IN YOUR MIND.

1.

THEY/THEM AS A PRONOUN FOR ONE PERSON — ONE PERSON OF NONSPECIFIC, UNKNOWN, OR NONBINARY GENDER — HAS BEEN AROUND FOR SUCH A LONG TIME. CHAUCER USED IT, AND SO DID SHAKESPEARE AND JANE AUSTEN.


AND WHOSO FYNDETH HYM OUT OF SWICH BLAME, THEY WOL COME UP...



(THE CANTERBURY TALES,
TRANSLATION BY PAUL SCHAFFNER)

1343-1400


THERE'S NOT A MAN I MEET BUT DOETH SALUTE ME/ AS IF I WERE THEIR WELL-ACQUAINTED FRIEND...



(THE COMEDY OF ERRORS)

1564-1616

TO BE SURE, YOU KNEW NO ACTUAL GOOD OF ME — BUT NOBODY THINKS OF THAT WHEN THEY FALL IN LOVE.



(PRIDE AND PREJUDICE)

1775-1817

SOMEONE LEFT THEIR COAT!

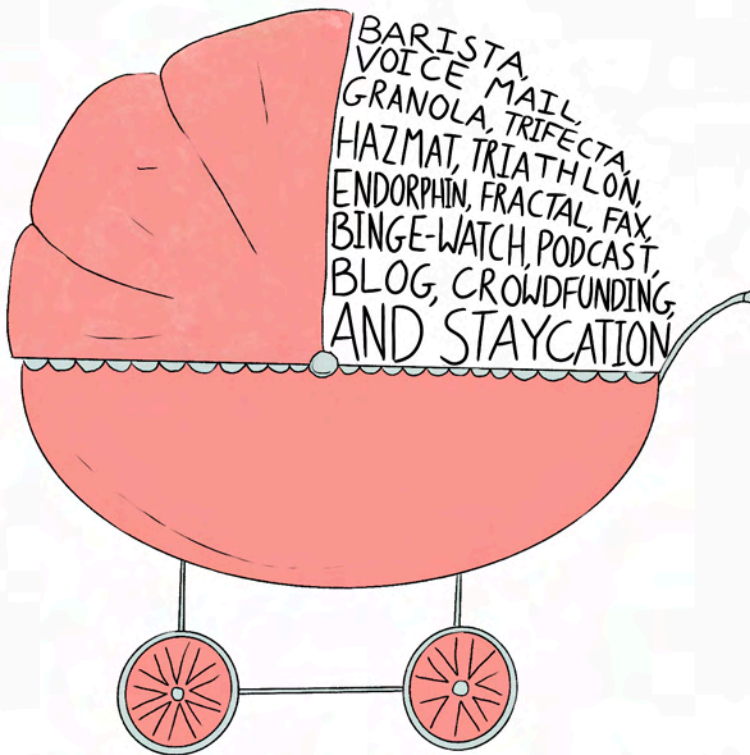


?~?

YOU WILL BE JOINING A LONG LINE OF LITERARY LIGHTS WHO HAVE USED THEY/THEM AS A SINGULAR PRONOUN, FANCYPANTS.

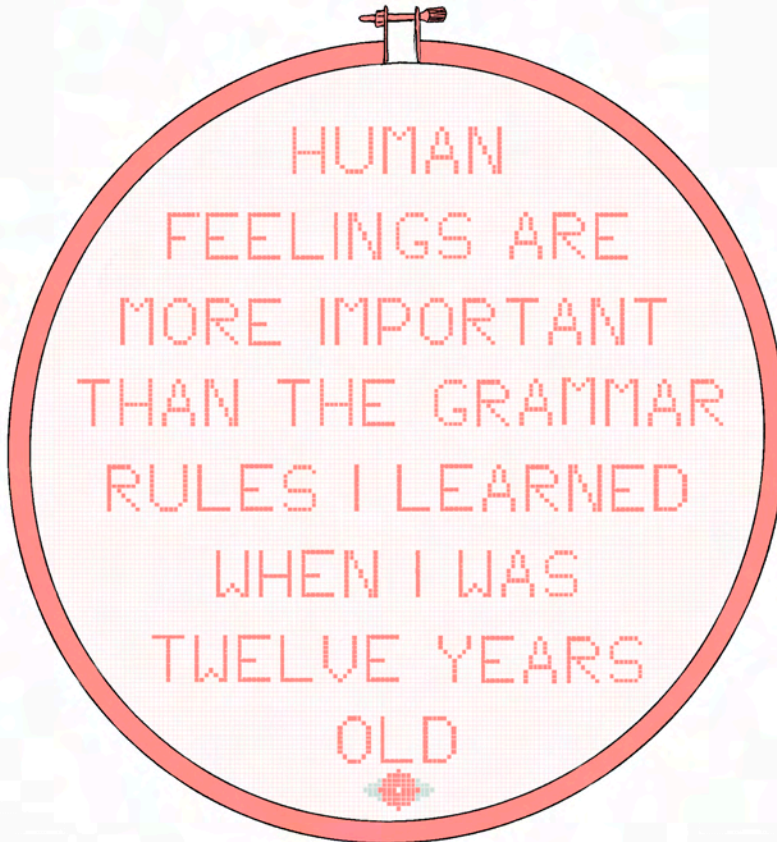
2.

WE USE NEW WORDS ALL THE TIME.



ARE ALL WORDS THAT ARE YOUNGER THAN I AM (AND I AM, AS WE CAN AGREE, SPRING FRESH). YOU WEREN'T TAUGHT ABOUT PODCASTS IN GRADE 7 ENGLISH, BUT THEY'RE STILL REAL, AND SO IS THE WORD "PODCAST," AND SO ARE THEY/THEM AS SINGULAR PRONOUNS.

3.



IF I CAN HELP MY FRIENDS OR LOVED ONES OR COLLEAGUES OR TOTAL STRANGERS OR EVEN NEMESSES FEEL SUPPORTED AND COMFORTABLE WITH ME, THAT'S WHAT I WANT. THAT'S WHAT THEY DESERVE. THAT'S WHAT EVERYONE DESERVES (EVEN PEOPLE WE DON'T LIKE).



TAKE IT WITH YOU:

HOW TO GET SOMEONE'S NEW NAME AND/OR PRONOUNS RIGHT, EVERY TIME, SOONER THAN YOU THINK.

1. HOLD YOURSELF ACCOUNTABLE ALL THE TIME.
2. ASK OTHER PEOPLE TO HOLD YOU ACCOUNTABLE TOO.
3. PRACTICE IF YOU FEEL NERVOUS.

BONUS! THREE FRAMES ON THEY/THEM PRONOUNS.

1. THEY/THEM AS A PRONOUN FOR ONE PERSON HAS BEEN AROUND FOR CENTURIES.
2. WE USE NEW (TO US) WORDS ALL THE TIME.
3. HUMAN FEELINGS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE GRAMMAR RULES I LEARNED WHEN I WAS TWELVE.

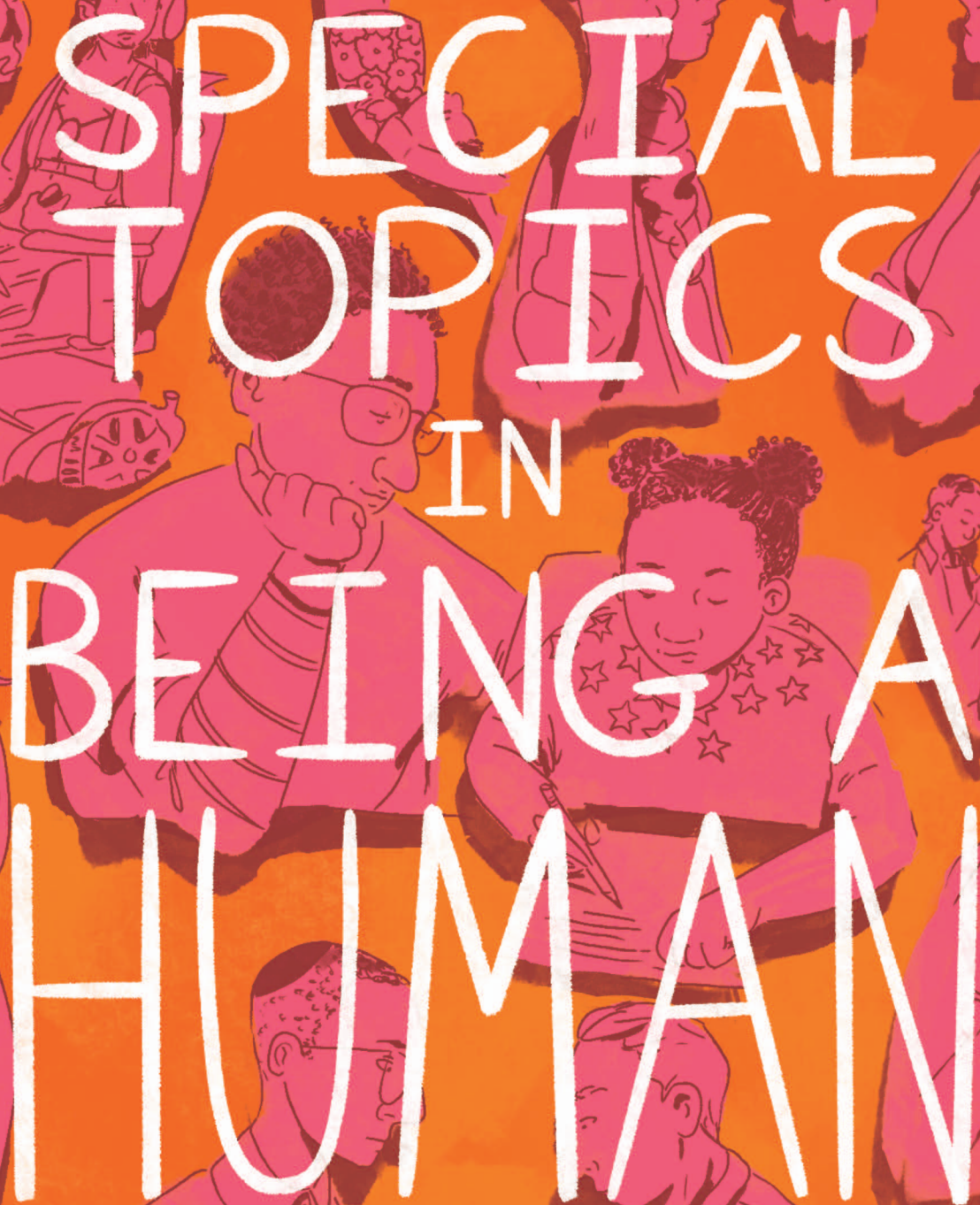


S. BEAR BERGMAN is a writer, storyteller, activist, and the founder and publisher of Flamingo Rampant, which makes feminist, culturally diverse children’s picture books about LGBTQ+ kids and families. He writes creative nonfiction for grown-ups, fiction for children, resolutely factual features for various publications, and the advice column “Asking Bear.” His books include *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You* and *Blood, Marriage, Wine & Glitter*, and he was the coeditor with Kate Bornstein of *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*.

sbearbergman.com | askingbear.com



SAUL FREEDMAN-LAWSON makes art about queerness, transness, Judaism, and childhood. They like to draw people with big noses and big genders. *Special Topics in Being a Human* is their first full-length book.



SPECIAL TOPICS IN BEING A HUMAN

A QUEER AND TENDER GUIDE TO THINGS
I'VE LEARNED THE HARD WAY ABOUT
CARING FOR PEOPLE, INCLUDING MYSELF

S. BEAR BERGMAN

ILLUSTRATED BY SAUL FREEDMAN-LAWSON