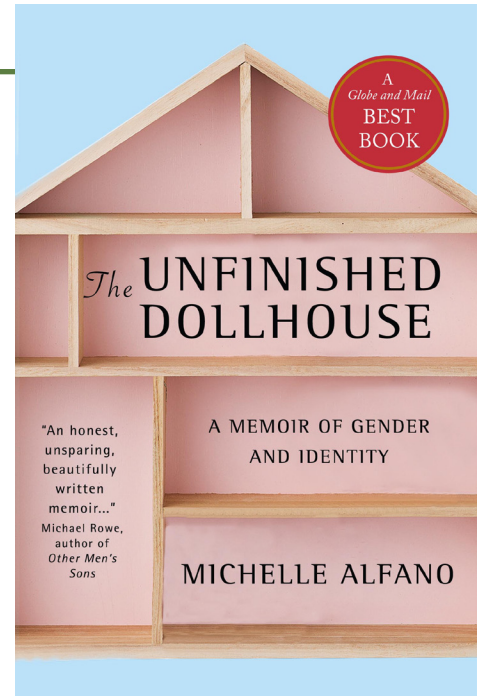


READER'S GUIDE

The Unfinished Dollhouse by Michelle Alfano

INTRODUCING *The Unfinished Dollhouse*

No mother is prepared for the moment when her child comes out to her as a person whose physical gender is out-of-keeping with his emotional and psychological gender-identity. The central metaphor of *The Unfinished Dollhouse* tells the story: on Frankie's fourth birthday, her parents Michelle and Rob purchased a kit to create a beautiful dollhouse. Michelle imagined building the home, buying the tiny pieces of furniture and accessories to fill it and, more importantly, the times she and her daughter would spend constructing the perfect dollhouse — a fantasy of domestic and familial happiness. Frankie expressed no interest in such typically girlish pursuits because Frankie did not identify as female. In the years to follow, Frankie's parents experienced an education in parenting a child transitioning from female to male — which pronouns to use, how to disclose the information to and deal with the reactions of others, and how to deal with it themselves.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Parenthood and Motherhood

Rob and Michelle are constantly juxtaposed in their approach to dealing with a child in distress; their approaches of tough love and sympathy, respectively, when confronted with Frankie's depression are flipped when confronted with his transition. Overall, *The Unfinished Dollhouse* is about the resolve to stand with your child and protect them against the sometimes hostile exterior world, regardless of your own personal feelings about what they are doing. Michelle's is a journey from mystification about what it is to be transgender, through frustration about the pace of the change and her own inability to cope, fear and anxiety for her child's safety, to acceptance not only of her son but also of the changes his transition imposed on her own life.

Gender Identity and Transitioning

Frankie's transition deals with all aspects of the FTM transition — from dressing to pass, top surgery, name changes, bathroom struggles, medical intervention, and finally acceptance from friends and family. Alfano's choice of pronouns signals very clearly the point at which acceptance and understanding are achieved, regardless of the emotions the experience invokes in her. Seeing the transition from an outside point of view also shows someone confronting their own gender expectations and their identification as the mother of a daughter, a prospective mini-me whose erasure is initially devastating. It shows someone whose ideals initially conform to stylized gender norms, and the ways in which those norms and expectations, once subverted by someone the holder loves dearly, must change.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What did you learn from the book?
2. Have you had any experiences with parenting trans children or expectations about the challenges it might present? Did the book confirm or deviate from those expectations or experiences?
3. What kind of language does Alfano use when discussing her son's transition? Does it help or hinder her communication?
4. How controversial do you think the ideas Alfano proposes are, and why?
5. Did the writing leave you with any unanswered questions? What are they?
6. How did you connect to the piece, as a parent or as a child? Did you empathize more with Frankie, Michelle, or Rob?
7. How has Alfano approached her own story: with humour, irony, distance, sympathy, or something else entirely?



ABOUT MICHELLE

Michelle Alfano is a Toronto writer whose fiction and non-fiction work has been published in Canada and in the United States. Her short story “Opera” was a finalist for the Journey Prize; *Made Up of Arias* (Blaurock Press, 2008), the novella based on that story, won the Bressani Award for Short Fiction. She is the former Associate Editor-in-Chief of the literary quarterly *Descant*.