

Books

More than Fine: An Indispensable Exploration of the Gender Spectrum

BY SHANNA HOLLICH

Rhea Ewing, *Fine: A Comic about Gender*. Liveright/Norton, 2022. 319 pp. pap., \$21.00, ISBN 978-1631496806.

I knew I was going to love this book the moment it landed on my desk. It's a comic book — a format that is growing in popularity for many reasons, and one that I particularly love for its ability to make complicated or difficult subjects more approachable through the power of visual artistry. It's about gender — a topic I have spent most of my life reading and learning and thinking about, and one that is often complicated or difficult to approach and discuss. *Fine: A Comic about Gender* delivered exactly what I was hoping for, while also managing to go well beyond my initial expectations.

Fine is a work of nonfiction, and at first glance it appears to be one of a type of graphic memoir about gender that has become a popular target of both acclaim and attack over the last few years.¹ This one straddles the line, however, between scholarly and popular, making it accessible to a wide variety of audiences. While there are elements of memoir here, the main throughline is essentially a grassroots ethnographic study conducted by Ewing over the course of several years. As they neared their own college graduation, they became consumed by the question “What is gender?” To help find answers, they interviewed friends and strangers and documented those conversations in both words and pictures. The result is even more powerful than an individual memoir; it is a series of portraits, providing multiple glimpses into the lives of a diverse collection of people across a range of gender identities and expressions. Rather than learning from one person's story, we instead benefit from seeing and comparing the gender experience across multiple types of lived experiences.

The art is simple and straightforward while still being true to life and representative of the real people involved in the making of this book. This style is well-suited to the subject matter: realistic enough to make the reader feel that they are reading and learning about real people, but not so detailed or hyper-realistic that it distracts from the subject matter. This is one of the strengths of a skilled comics artist, and Ewing's mastery is on full display here. Pairing



words with images can help facilitate understanding, especially for topics that can be difficult to process. Ewing's use of drawings allows the reader to become familiar with a wide variety of gender presentations, but in a way that is less direct than a series of photographs would be; this can further help to ease a new reader into an unfamiliar or potentially uncomfortable topic.

A comic about gender is clearly not going to shy away from discussing difficult topics, but *Fine* goes a bit further. The

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narrative is divided into subsections that clearly recognize the intersectionality of gender with other fundamental questions of human identity, such as race, culture, language, and our physical bodies. The intentional inclusion of stories from people who differ in terms of race, class,

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and disability status continually highlights how gender does not exist in a vacuum but is instead ineluctably intertwined with all the things that make us who we truly are. One of the best parts of Ewing's work is that it raises more questions than it answers, which allows the reader to begin their own journey of inquiry and exploration.

Essentially, what Ewing provides here is an accessible, entry-level introduction to gender studies. The book's opening includes a content warning and a list of resources, which makes this a potentially good resource for a beginning gender studies course. Students who are used to reading dense works of prose will likely also appreciate the refreshing change of format. It would be especially interesting to discuss Ewing's process of making the book and how it parallels and borrows from more well-established research methodologies, which could serve as a valuable introduction to research methods in more formal academic works. *Fine* would pair well with popular graphic memoirs such as Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*² or with documentary films that explore gender in interesting ways, such as Luchina Fisher's *Mama Gloria*.³ This inclusive collection would be at home wherever people find themselves asking that complicated question: What is gender?

NOTES

1. Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer* is likely the most well-known example; see www.nytimes.com/2022/05/01/books/maia-kobabe-gender-queer-book-ban.html.
2. www.simonandschuster.com/books/Gender-Queer-A-Memoir/Maia-Kobabe/9781549304002.
3. www.mamagloriafilm.com.

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