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Michelle Alfano on Her Memoir, *The Unfinished Dollhouse*

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Article abstract

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Michelle Alfano on Her Memoir, *The Unfinished Dollhouse*¹

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Abstract: Liana Cusmano's interview with Toronto author Michelle Alfano offers reflections on gender identity and living through a child's transitioning. The act of writing helped Alfano overcome the distress she felt during this difficult time. In her memoir *The Unfinished Dollhouse*, Michelle Alfano recounts the journey she underwent in accepting and embracing her son's transgender identity. From tell-tale signs in early childhood and the mental and physical afflictions in the early teen years, to the reactions of family and friends and the final steps in a social and medical transition from female to male, Alfano explores the thoughts and feelings she experienced over the years as her son, River, fought to be his truest self.

Keywords: gender, identity, transitioning, memoir, writing, Alfano, Cusmano

Liana Cusmano: *How did writing this memoir affect your experience as River's mother during his transition? When did you decide to write it, and why?*

Michelle Alfano: I decided to document what was happening with River in an anonymous blog starting in the early months of 2013, a few months after he came out at 15, almost 16. For me it was a cathartic experience as I was feeling very torn—between immense relief that we were finally getting at the source of his unhappiness and poor health over the last four years, and a great deal of anxiety about what the future would hold. I was hoping to contain my concerns by putting it on paper.

Some time later I showed it to River and a few close friends, and it seemed to lessen the tension between us. Something interesting happened—my emotional responses when spoken aloud became much more palatable when River read them on paper. For a time I stopped writing because I was emotionally exhausted but River urged me to continue—he knew it was important for our relationship for me to continue.

¹ This interview was previously published in *Accenti Magazine* on August 15, 2018 (<https://accenti.ca/michelle-alfano-on-her-memoir-the-unfinished-dollhouse/>).

Cusmano: *Both you and River have spoken of the benefits of finding a place in the trans community, where experience is shared via social media, videos, blogs and conversation. What place does your memoir have in the community as trans literature?*

Alfano: Hopefully the memoir sends a few positive signals out into the trans community of children and parents and beyond: a) things can often resolve themselves if you love and support your child—that not all is hopeless. Many children thrive with support; b) it's acceptable for parents to feel lost and experience fear during this process.

Some readers don't like the admission that I was afraid, angry, melancholy. But those feelings are real amongst parents and need to be addressed and supported as long as we do the right thing by our children.

Cusmano: *Did you write it as a form of therapy? For the benefit of others? Both?*

Alfano: Both! And there is the obvious detail that I am a writer, a writer who communicates about the things that concern her the most at any given time. At that time, my child's emotional and physical well-being was uppermost in my mind. It still is.

Cusmano: *How do you think that societal standards of attractiveness are a threat to trans individuals? How is this related to micro-aggressions against the trans community?*

Alfano: I think there is a tyranny of aesthetics regarding the appearance of trans people. If they are "successful" at passing, they are generally supported and admired (activist Janet Mock, actor Laverne Cox), but if they are not "successful," do not pass, they are vilified and attacked in public and on social media. The standards are too high, too artificial—they are even too high for cis women and near impossible for trans people. We are, as a society, currently unnerved by gender ambiguity—and often respond in a hostile or derisive manner to trans people. I think that has to end in order to create a more welcoming environment for trans and gender non-conforming people.

Cusmano: *In comedy or pop culture, for example, people elicit laughter and disgust by referring to someone by saying, "By the way, she used to be*

a man.” How can we make small changes in contexts like these to protect trans people and reduce their marginalization? How does writing about trans people contribute to this social shift?

Alfano: Parents and the people who love trans people have to draw a hard red line about respect for trans people. I am not a supporter of calling out culture but I do think we have to indicate very strongly that we love and support our trans folks no matter what their physical representation is. We are dealing with human beings! They did not transition because it is fashionable to do so. It usually involved years of self-examination and a great deal of bravery to come out—so respect that. Demand that other people respect that. It is unacceptable to attack people on the basis of their physical representation.

Cusmano: *What would you say to parents of a transgender child who grieve the child they thought they had, who feel affronted when their child wants to start binding or packing, who are devastated by their child’s desire to live as someone who is transgender, non-binary, or trans-masculine/trans-feminine?*

Alfano: Just a word about the concept of “grief.” The “grief” of parents is a real trigger in the trans community. Sometimes you might be reprimanded by others in the community when you display this, even in private online forums that are meant to support the parents of trans children. I think parents are entitled to this feeling—it signifies the end of an illusion about what your child’s (and your own) future was to be. We all have a plan (or a fantasy) about what our child’s future holds. It may have been false but it was *your* illusion and now it has disappeared.

For the parents of trans children—find an ally or allies for emotional support. Quickly. If you do not have one in your own inner circle, search in your community or online for support. I personally can connect parents with groups online that offer support. It’s important that your feelings not overwhelm your child’s experience as they are already carrying an intense burden and sense of responsibility. Remember, you are the first line of defence for your child.

Cusmano: *What helped you the most in overcoming the distress you felt during River’s transition?*

Alfano: Writing! For years I was alone (well—just me, my husband Rob, and my therapist who is wonderful) in sorting out these emotional issues. Now, I am in a support group for parents of trans children and as one member said, “No one will ever understand your situation except for another parent in the same situation.” That is completely true.