

Susmita

EXPLORES HER
HEART'S GENDER



WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

KIKI MAREE

These children's books have been created to help our children and tweens become educated on their bodies, their boundaries, their sexuality and their cyclic nature.

They are an offshoot of a series of adventure books written about a girl called Susmita who traveled the world. Susmita as a child wears gender neutral clothes and has brown skin and red hair so as to not exclude any one culture in particular.

Join Susmita in one of her biggest adventures yet—exploring her heart's gender. In this educative book, Susmita travels across the globe to learn what gender means to different people in different cultures, so that she can better understand herself and her friends around her.

SUSMITA EXPLORES
HER HEART'S GENDER

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY
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TO ALL OUR YOUNG HUMANS
YOU ARE PERFECT,
JUST AS YOU ARE.

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One sunny afternoon, Susmita and her little brother Ko were playing in the sandpit in their backyard. While Susmita was digging up the sand using her toy truck, Ko spun around and around in little circles in the green polka-dotted dress he borrowed from Susmita's closet.

Susmita was just about to tip out a load of sand from her truck when she looked up to see her uncle walking over towards them.



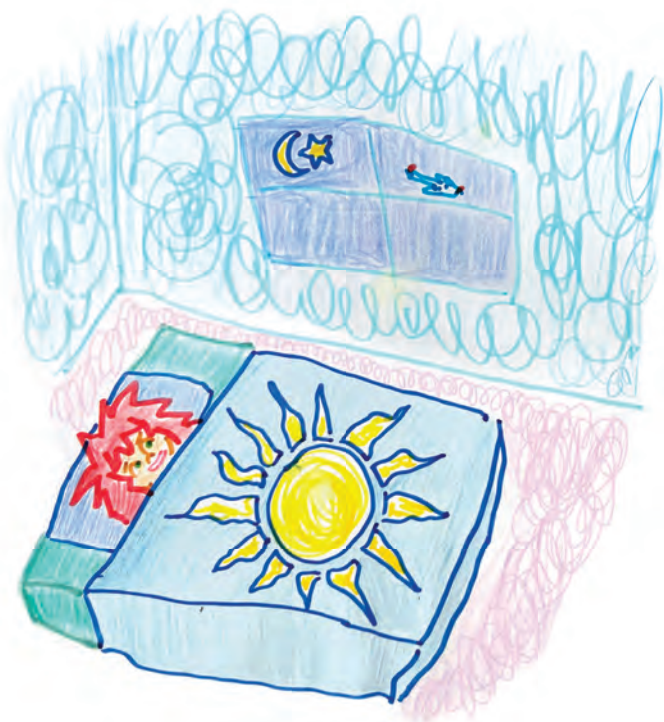
"Hi kids" Susmita's uncle called out. "Oh, why are you wearing a skirt and playing with dolls again Ko?" Susmita's uncle gruffed. "Those are for girls you know." He said before turning to Susmita.

"And why are you playing with trucks Susmita? Don't you know little girls play with dolls, not trucks!" Susmita's uncle continued, with a look of concern washing over his face.

Susmita said nothing as she continued to play with her truck in the sand. However, she couldn't help but feel a little upset by what her uncle said. Why did it matter what they were wearing or playing with?

Susmita really enjoys playing with her big yellow truck, and her little brother absolutely loves spinning in her green polka dotted dress!

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That night, while Susmita lay in bed looking out her window at the stars twinkling in the night sky, she could not stop thinking about what her uncle had said.

She didn't feel like she fit into those rules about boys and girls, and neither did her brother.

While gazing out of her window, a plane

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flew overhead, its lights flashing red and yellow. Upon seeing this, Susmita was filled with excitement and momentarily forgot all about her uncle, as she remembered that they were going on a family vacation tomorrow, flying all around the world!

Susmita wondered if in the countries she was going to visit it would be different when it came to how boys and girls were expected to behave. She knew that people spoke different languages in other countries, and wore different clothes, so perhaps the boys and girls could also be and act differently!

The next morning, before Susmita set off on her family adventure, she asked her mum if what her uncle had said about boys and girls was true.

"No Susmita, it's not true". She said, as she packed Susmita's lunchbox for the plane.

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"It is true that many people *think* gender is simple—that boys are boys, and girls are girls" she said, closing the lid to Susmita's lunch box with a gentle click clack.

"But gender is more than that," she continued, "gender is how people feel inside. Some people feel like boys, some feel like girls, and some feel like both or neither. The only way to really know someone else's gender is to ask them, because there is no physical part of your body that shows your gender."

"And in different parts of the world," Susmita's mum continued, with a twinkle in her eye, "people experience gender in many different ways, which

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you will be able to see with your very own eyes on our round the world adventure, how lucky for you!”

Susmita felt so excited at hearing this—her suspicions were right! Susmita was now even more eager to travel and to discover how people from different cultures feel and think about gender.

Their first stop was Indonesia. Susmita’s mum had told her on the plane on their way there that people express gender differently from what she’s used to, which excited Susmita so much that she felt butterflies in her tummy.



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They first arrived in Bali, a small Island of Indonesia, where Susmita was surrounded by many new sights and smells.

The first thing Susmita noticed was the warmth of the air brushing against her face, and decided then and there that she already loved Bali.

As she walked through the busy streets, she breathed in the aromas of incense burning in tiny little offerings on the ground.



She inhaled the smells of the delicious Balinese food being prepared at the restaurants (or Warungs, as they say in Bali), to fill her nostrils, her tummy grumbling at the thought of a yummy Balinese meal.

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Susmita was taking another deep breath in, sniffing away at the yummy air, when she noticed the familiar scent of frangipanis, her favourite flower!

She looked up expecting to find a frangipani tree, when instead she saw a man, wearing what she would call a skirt, smiling down at her, with a pretty yellow and white frangipani placed delicately behind his ear.



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In her own culture, wearing skirts and flowers is generally seen as something only girls do. Here, Susmita was noticing, everyone could wear skirts and flowers. How exciting! Susmita was already starting to see differences in how people express themselves!

"Hi, I'm Susmita. I love your skirt!" Susmita exclaimed to the man.

"Terima Kasih Susmita! My name is Ketut, and these are actually called kambens!" Ketut said as he smiled down at her, pointing to both his and Susmita's kambens.

"Oh, sorry, my mistake! I love your Kamben Ketut!" Beamed Susmita, as she corrected herself, her heart swelling with excitement, both at learning this new word, and at the thought of



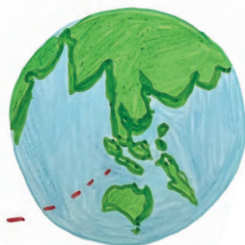
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telling her baby brother, who loves to wear her dresses, all about the Balinese kambens!

Susmita waved goodbye to her new friend Ketut, and continued her travels to Sulawesi, another island of Indonesia, where she'd meet the Bugis people.



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As soon as Susmita arrived in Sulawesi, she was again hit by that warm tropical breeze and instantly felt at ease. There were also delicious smells filling the busy streets, like she had experienced in Bali, however it all felt a little different. Susmita was looking around to see if Sulawesi also had the small offerings on the ground, when her eyes fell upon two very beautifully dressed people, so she decided to go and say hello.

“Hi, I’m Susmita, I love your clothes!”
Susmita said excitedly.

“Hi Susmita” they both replied at the same time.

“I am Sitti” cooed one, while brushing aside a pink head scarf.

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"And I'm Pua" said the other, flashing Susmita a wide smile.

"We are Bissu" Pua continued, "we embody a combination of all genders."

"This is exactly what I am trying to learn more about! I want to see what other ideas of gender exist in the world outside of the ones in my culture" Susmita said, not able to believe her luck at meeting these two beautifully dressed Bissu.



"Well, you have come to the right place, little one," Sitti said smoothly, "as in Indonesia we have multiple genders, five in fact".

"We have boys, and girls," Pua said, "like you probably also do in your country. But we also have Bissu, like us," Pua continued, while doing a little courtesy.

"And we also have calalai, who are girls who take on the roles typically given to boys, and calabai, who are boys who take on the roles typically given to girls." Sitti said, finishing Pua's sentence.

"The Bissu" Sitti continued, noticing Susmita's eyes lighting up with this new information, "are considered special people who can live between the human world and the spiritual realm. We are seen as shamans, priests, and healers, and people believe that we

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possess spiritual power, also known as sakti."

"Oh this sounds so magical!" Susmita exclaimed, her voice full of wonder and delight.

Susmita imagined the beautiful Bissu of Sulawesi speaking with the spirit of her grandma and grandpa, as well as her dog, Lucy!



Susmita was amazed by how this culture saw gender. It was so much bigger than just the two choices she knew about back home.

Seeing how these people are celebrated and respected in the Bugis culture, Susmita was beginning to understand that gender is a broad spectrum, like the colour spectrum! It isn't just black and white, boy and girl, but a rainbow of different colours! And that each culture has its own ways of recognizing and honouring it.

“Thank you for sharing your knowledge with me Pua and Sitta, I am so grateful, I feel like you have made my heart grow bigger!”

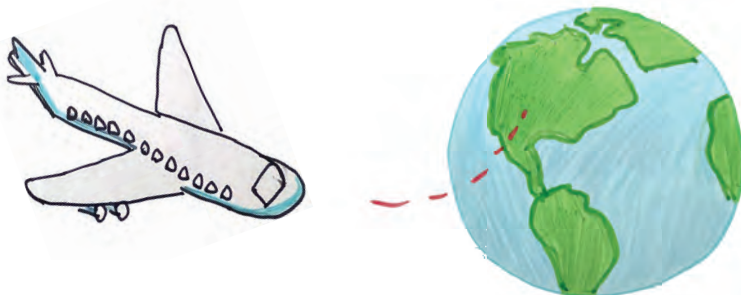
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"It is our pleasure." They both said, again at the same time. Susmita wondered if they can do that because they can speak to the spirit world. Susmita's skin goosebumped at the thought.

Susmita said goodbye to her friends as she made her way to her next flight, where she was off to the Americas!



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Susmita noticed immediately the difference in the climate here in the Americas. It was hot, like Indonesia, but the air felt so dry! And while Susmita knew that there were many people who lived in the Americas, at the place that Susmita had arrived to, there were not many people at all.

Susmita had been invited into a small village, where she was to meet with the Two-Spirit People—who among Indigenous communities are honoured for having both boy and girl spirits inside of them.

As Susmita walked to the village she took in the plants around her. They were so different here compared to where she had just been. Susmita was delighted

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to see that there were hundreds of cactuses everywhere, all different shapes and sizes. Susmita hadn't seen a cactus in real life before and was completely mesmerised.

Susmita finally arrived at the village and was met by her new friend Maka who would be teaching her today about the Two-Spirit people.



"Hi Susmita, I have been looking forward to meeting you," Maka said warmly as Susmita arrived.

"Hi Maka, me too! Thank you for having me" Susmita replied, full of excitement.

Susmita listened as her new Two-Spirit friend Maka explains how, for them, gender is a sacred journey, and it's not about fitting into just one box.

Susmita smiled at this, as she remembered her uncle trying to put her into a box of being a girl who can't play with trucks.

"Two Spirit people are often medicine people in our community, valued for our connection to the spiritual world." Maka continued, while looking out into the distance at an eagle soaring in the light blue sky. "Having both boy and girl energy inside us helps us see things in a special, balanced way." Maka said, looking at the sky wistfully.



“Kind of like the Bissu in Indonesia” thought Susmita, following Maka’s gaze towards the eagle. Susmita didn’t know if she imagined it, but it seemed as though the eagle stopped flapping its wings at the exact moment Maka had started gazing at it, and she wondered, “is this the connection Maka was talking about?”

“How wonderful that these cultures have these special magical people to support their communities,” Susmita thought to herself, about both the Bissu and the Two-Spirit People.

Unfortunately Susmita had to say goodbye to her new friend Maka, as she had two more stops to go on her journey. She waved goodbye to Maka, promising to write when she arrived home, and headed to her new destination, India.

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Susmita had been talking with her mum about gender in India, and was excited to meet with the Hijra community that lived there. In India, Hijras are recognized as a third gender—not a boy, or a girl.

Susmita was not prepared for the sheer array of colours that filled her eyes when she arrived in India. It was like she had fallen feet first into a rainbow! There were women washing colourful clothes in the river, cows eating orange and pink flowers, and clothes hung to dry on the green boats floating on the river.

Susmita sat for a moment as she took in the sights of this new place, feeling as though she could sit and watch the busy movement of colour all day.

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Susmita noticed that one of the people in the colourful pink and yellow saris began walking up to her, and got excited as the colours of the swaying fabrics came closer.

"Hello little one, my name is Rani, are you enjoying the view?" Rani smiled warmly as she looked down at Susmita sitting amongst the remains of the day's excitement.



"Yes thank you Rani! My name is Susmita, nice to meet you" Susmita replied.

"I am actually really excited, however, to meet and learn more about the Hijra people!" Susmita added enthusiastically, hoping that her new friend could lead the way.

"Well you are in luck, as I am Hijra, and I would love to tell you about our people." Rani said, as she took a seat beside Susmita"

"Throughout time, Hijras have served as spiritual figures, especially in blessings and weddings." She said in a gentle voice to Susmita.

"They have existed for many many years, beginning in ancient Hindu texts." Rani continued.

"That must be so nice to be able to attend so many weddings!" Susmita

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said, as she smiled back at Rani in her bright and colourful sari.

"Yes, it sure is," smiled Rani.

Susmita thanked Rani for taking the time to share with her, and got ready for the last stop on her trip, Samoa. Susmita is so excited to visit Samoa as she has heard such wonderful things about this country.



She also can't wait to learn about the Fa'afafine, a Somoan identity where the boys that are assigned male at birth identify as a third gender. Susmita had learned that Fa'afafine are a widely accepted part of Samoan culture who contribute to the cultural, social, and

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family life in various ways, and she could not wait to find out what this looked like!

As Susmita stepped off the plane she was met by a beautiful Fa'afafine, called Sina, who welcomed her with a warm embrace, and gifted her a flower—it was a frangipani! Susmita's favourite!

"Thank you Sina, I love frangipanis!" Susmita exclaimed, as she placed it behind her ear.



"Sina, could you please explain to me a bit more about Fa'afafine?" She asked as she looked into Sina's beautiful brown smiling eyes.

"I would love to Susmita," Sina replied, gesturing towards the beach nearby. "Shall I tell you as we take a walk along the beautiful crystal blue sea?"

"I would love that!" Susmita gushed, as she took in the sights around her, the sea breeze gently blowing her hair. As far as Susmita's eyes could see, there were green mountains and blue ocean. The sky seemed to look brighter here, and the sun seemed to look bigger.

"Fa'afafine hold both boy and girl roles. We help to take care of children like yourself, we make sure everyone in our neighbourhood is getting along, and we organise big events," Sina said warmly to Susmita.

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"People come to us to help them if they are struggling, and we are oftentimes seen as the leader of our communities" Sina continued.

"Wow! That is so cool, Sina!" Susmita smiled, as she pictured Sina as a leader in her own hometown.

Sina and Susmita enjoyed a nice walk along the beach before their bittersweet farewell, as it was now time for Susmita to go back home.

Susmita had loved learning about all of the different expressions of gender she had seen in just four cultures! And she was so happy to go home and share this knowledge with her friends and family.

On the plane, Susmita had a lot of time to think. Susmita had seen with her own eyes that, in some cultures, gender differences are not only



accepted but embraced, and seen as a very important aspect of society.

Susmita then wondered what kind of impact not recognising these genders has on societies with only two genders, how people must feel who do not fit into these two roles? She thinks of her brother who plays with dolls and wears dresses... how will he feel as he grows older?

She also thinks about how nice it would be to have Bissu or Two-Spirit people to turn to for support like the Indonesian and Indigenous American people have.

Seeing all of these beautiful different ways of gender expression, Susmita decides not only to share this new knowledge, but to go on her own inner gender journey, to see how she truly feels, now that her heart feels like it has a bigger place to explore.

She has learned so much about how in

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these other cultures, gender can be many different things, and doesn't have to be tied to specific roles or behaviours. She also realised that people back home seemed to have just made the rules up as they went along, so why couldn't she?



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Once Susmita arrived home, she took some time to really feel what her heart said it wanted to do and be in the world, to see what her heart's gender was. She knew that there was no rush, and might take days, weeks or even months to see how she truly feels!



To help her on her journey, Susmita thought of ways that she could express the different feelings inside of her...

"I know," she thought, "I can begin by using my imagination!".

So Susmita imagines trying on all sorts of different hats that make her feel different ways: a cosy rainbow beanie, a pink and purple trapper hat, a blue cloche hat and a bright orange sunhat.



"Wow, this really works" thought Susmita. "The hats are a fun way for me to explore the many possibilities of who I can be! I feel different with each and every hat!"

At this moment, Susmita could really see why wearing different clothes can feel so important to people who want to show the world how they feel inside!



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A few days after completing her little hat imagination experiment, Susmita went for a walk in the meadow, still with her heart's gender in mind, when she just so happened to find a magical mirror!

When she looked into it, she didn't just see her reflection—she also saw all of the different ways she could be, from the inside out!

Susmita saw that just like how she likes many different colours—pink, yellow, and green, she can also feel different things



about who she is on the inside.

She saw that one day, she can feel strong like a red fire truck, and the next day soft like a purple flower. Susmita began to realise that she can be many things at once, and that she doesn't have to choose, and that feels just right.

It could be wearing certain hats or clothes, spending time with certain people, or it might be how she spends her time—some days climbing trees, and other days relaxing and reading in a hammock.



Susmita listened closely to herself and decided to just follow what feels good, even if it doesn't always make sense.

Susmita also learned that what feels good for her might change, and that's exciting!

Susmita realised that just like with her hats, colours, and feelings, gender is also something personal, something that comes from the heart.

Susmita started to wonder...

"So, what does gender feel like for me then? Am I a boy, a girl, or am I like the Bissu and embody all genders?"

As she looked deeper into the mirror, she thought more about the things she liked to do. She saw herself playing in the dirt and with dinosaurs, like what people say boys do. But she also enjoys wearing sparkly shoes, and playing with dolls, like what people expect girls to do.

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She then saw herself twirling and dancing in a dress, while other days, playing soccer with her friends, and other days she just felt like sitting quietly and watching the clouds. The mirror showed her that all of those feelings are a part of who she is and equally important.



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Susmita could feel her heart growing in her chest with all of the possibilities of who she could be, and so she sang out loud at the top of her lungs “I can be the real me!”.

Susmita could also see that for some people, their gender feels clear and stays the same, and that for others, it might change like the wind, shifting as they grow and explore.

And that both ways are okay!

She smiled, realising that gender isn't about choosing one thing or the other—it's about what feels true for each person, deep inside.

After her stroll in the meadow, Susmita walked home where her family was having a birthday party for her cousin.

Susmita gave her cousin a bunch of balloons and told him “happy birthday!”



She then placed a flower behind his ear and hugged him.

Susmita's uncle walked over at that moment and exclaimed "you can't wear a flower in your hair kid, you're a boy!" Her uncle then turned to where her brother sat, again playing with his doll, with a pink bow in his hair.

"And what are you doing Ko? Why are you wearing a pink bow and playing with dolls again?" He sighed at Ko.

Ko looked down as he twirled the doll's hair between his fingers.

"Hey uncle!" Susmita said in a puff as she hurried to Ko's side.

"Did you know that pink used to be considered a boy's colour? And that girls didn't wear pants until fairly recently? Things change uncle," Susmita said with a smile, remembering what she had heard her parents talking about after her trip away.

"No one is going to shame my brother" Susmita thought, as she flashed her brother a loving smile. Susmita's brother smiled back, with tiny little tears in his eyes.



"And did you know that in Bali, the men wear flowers behind their ears!" Susmita exclaimed.

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"I didn't know that Susmita," her uncle replied, looking unsure.

"That's ok uncle, now you do! Look, I can show you!" Susmita said while jumping to her feet. She ran to her bedroom and came back with the photo album from their adventure across the globe.

"Look, look!" Susmita said, an enormous smile spreading across her face.

"See how pretty this flower is on my friend Ketut!" she continued excitedly as she showed the photo album to her cousin and uncle.



"I suppose it is quite pretty Susmita, perhaps I could also wear a flower behind my ear?" Susmita's uncle said warily.

"Of course you can, uncle! Why not, flowers are beautiful!" Susmita stated, as she made her way out to the garden to pick her uncle a flower.

"Here you are uncle" Susmita cheered, handing her uncle a frangipani.



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“Why thank you Susmita” he said, placing the frangipani behind his ear.

Susmita was so happy to see that her uncle was finally beginning to understand.

Susmita then looked over at her younger cousin and little brother, who seemed as though they didn't quite understand, so she thought of an idea to help explain it to them a little better.



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"How about we all choose three or four of our favourite colours that represent how we feel on the inside, and we make a rainbow out of them!" Susmita explained.

"I'll go first. The colours that represent the way I feel inside are pink, green and yellow. Pink because I feel pretty, green because I feel energised in nature, and yellow because I feel happy, like a big smiling sunflower" Susmita said as she began collecting the colours.



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"Mine are pink, because I feel pretty, purple because I feel fancy, and ... blue because I feel like a big bright blue sky" Susmita's brother said with a smile on his face, "oh, and green because I feel sneaky and cheeky!" he giggled.

"I think mine are red and orange today, red because I feel strong and loud, and orange because I feel playful" Susmita's cousin chimed in.



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Susmita, her brother and her cousin built a beautiful rainbow together with all of the different colours that represented all the ways they feel inside.

Susmita stood in front of the big colourful rainbow and beamed at her family, feeling excited about this new open-minded world they were all entering into together.





THE END

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