



The Advocate

M a t t D e b e n h a m

THE ADVOCATE

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The Book of Right and Wrong (2010, The Ohio State University Press)

It's the August before sixth grade, and the psychologist at the middle school is already terrified of Mimi Acker and her family. Everyone is, at this point, and Mimi knows that's more of a good thing than a bad. When you have a daughter like Alix, you can't be soft. And Mimi was never soft, certainly not back when she was managing public relations for the Green Schools Fund, which, she likes to tell people, was her last act as a civilian. Alan, Mimi's husband, is less a fan of the confrontation. If it were up to him, they'd all be living on a mountain, home schooling Alix until she was eighteen. "Is there such a thing as home-colleging?" he said last night. "You and Alix can fight over who gets to be the student ringleader. I'll be the crusty dean with no patience for shenanigans."

But home schooling, Mimi believes, is for Evangelicals and pussies. And so she's in the office of Dr. DiCenzo, the counselor at the middle school Alix will be starting in fewer than two weeks in their little Massachusetts town of Rodale. Dr. DiCenzo is a tiny-boned thing who looks like she got out of grad school yesterday. With her long, narrow face and wet brown eyes, she reminds Mimi of a very pretty greyhound. Mimi almost feels sorry for her, and reminds herself to go easy with this one. The last thing you want is to ram through someone so completely, so many times, that they just shut down on you. Keep your enemies closer and all that. She learned this at the elementary school where Alix was a fifth-grader last year, back when things first changed. The ladies in the front office would see her coming and they'd go silent, none of them willing to risk eye contact. Alan is content to let Mimi handle these meetings. Though maybe "content" isn't exactly the word.

"It says here the hair's been an issue?" Dr. DiCenzo says. She's holding the file on Alix. Most parents would be heartsick to know their child had a file. Mimi has spent the last year making sure every person who comes into contact with her daughter gets an inch-thick manila folder.

"The hair's an issue," says Mimi. "Kids will pull at it. They assume it's a wig."

"And the clothes?" says DiCenzo. "What'll Ste—sorry. What'll *Alix* be wearing?"

"Probably an Old Navy top and jeans. Unless it's cold. Then she might add a sweatshirt or a sweater. You want to write that down?"

And Dr. DiCenzo had indeed put pen to paper before looking up. "I get it. You're teasing me."

Shit. Too harsh already. "Not teasing!" says Mimi, so brightly even she almost believes it. "Educating! I'm letting you know Alix is going to appear like pretty much every other sixth-grade girl here. Which is to say: flat little bean-body, long arms and legs, moody as fuck."

Dr. DiCenzo blinks at her, and Mimi can see she's already weary. It's going to be a long year for both of them. "That's all well and good, Mrs. Acker, but let me ask you: When's the last time you were in a middle school?"

The psychologist keeps those big eyes on her. "It's been a while," Mimi says. Since Culture Club had hits, is what she means.

"Then I'll put it this way: Stuff's changed. Evolution, hormones in the milk, prenatal vitamins. Whatever the cause, a lot of these girls? More curves than me."

Mimi smiles. "Well, no offense, but--"

"Some of them have more curves than *you*."

And Mimi is quiet. Out of the frying pan, into the motherfucking fire.

Mimi's not stupid. If she read in the paper about a family like hers, she'd roll her eyes and think: *Je-sus, really, lady?* And she's heard it all: She's warping her child, she's confusing the other kids, she's indulging the whims of an unformed mind, she's spitting in the face of God. And that's just in their town, a mostly-educated place where the school emails you to tell you the electricity went out for ten minutes today and everyone was SO BRAVE! But what Alix is is scary, and so people who hush their kids around burn victims and Sikhs have no problem freezing in the middle of a mall and saying, at conversational volume, *What the hell?* at what is clearly an eleven-year-old boy with Gwyneth Paltrow hair and a pink top.

He was a stunning guy. When he was Stephen, he was the tallest in his grade, jaw like the end of a two-by-four, big dark eyes, the shoulders of a first baseman. Of all the boys to become a girl, he is not the most well-suited for the job. It is akin to a car trying to be a motorcycle. Sometimes Mimi wonders what it would be like if she'd had the elfin child from Stephen's fifth-grade class, the one whose hairdresser mother kept his hair down to his shoulder blades, and who could pass, even in his everyday jeans and t-shirt, for a daughter on a Disney show. What she does not wonder is whether she would find that challenging enough.

Mimi comes home from the meeting at the middle school and there's Alix on the couch. Alan's upstairs, working in his office. He does contract law, which means he's able to do it from home and never has to see the inside of a courtroom. Which has always struck Mimi as tragic -- to be a lawyer and not use it in the coolest way possible? -- but this is why they work as a couple, balancing each other out.

It's been a moody summer for Alix. Mimi knows what it is: regular middle-school jitters mixed with Alix's "special situation," as the school administrators tend to call it. The kid's been impossible to get out of bed; she's been snapping at Mimi, her number-one advocate in this world; she's been slumping from bed (when forced out) to the couch, where she'll lay there, staring at the television. Alan thinks it's because Alix isn't involved in any *activities*, a word loaded with hidden meanings, all of them translating to Mimi as: This is all your fault.

Mimi remembers the morning last summer when she went from house to house on a Monday night, knocking on doors and telling all the neighbors that Stephen was now to be called Alix, and that he might look different but that he was the same person they'd always known. Alan had stayed home with Alix because Alix was ten and somebody had to stay with him. More than one person told Mimi they would be praying for her.

Mimi stands now in the little spot just inside the door that only a realtor would call the "foyer," as it's a three-foot-by-four-foot rectangle between the bottom of the stairs and the double-wide doorway to the living room. No one seems to have noticed Mom is home. "Hey, you," she chirps toward the back of the couch.

Alix raises her head off the padded sofa arm. "Hey."

"What's the haps, kiddo?"

Alix blinks at her. "What's the...what did you say?"

Shit, do they already no longer say that? "It used to mean 'what's happening'," says Mimi. "It's dumb. Been outside yet?"

"Too hot."

"It's breezy, though. Did you hear that thunderstorm last night? I think it scared away the humidity."

"That's pressure systems for you," is all Alix says. Mimi can't tell if she's mocking or trying to impress. At this age, possibly both.

Footsteps at the top of the stairs. "Meem, did you bring coffee?" Alan calls down.

"Shit," says Mimi. "Forgot. I'll go back out in a bit." She brightens. "Ali can come with me."

"There's no one named *Ali* here," Alix says. She's watching a show on one of the "learning" networks, her way of skirting the educational-viewing limitations in the household. It's a medical reality show with new-looking doctors standing blithely around while people on gurneys yell and bleed. Mimi used to be able to watch surgery programs. Today of all days, she cannot stomach that shit.

Alan stops two stairs from the bottom, so he can pretend to tower over Mimi. This is a thing they do. She looks up at him. He's put on weight this last year, but his hair and beard have compensated by becoming grayer, like strands of stainless steel. He's a handsome little bastard.

"So, coffee?" he says. "Is coffee happening?" He puts his hands out and shakes them at her. "Daddy needs his fix!"

"How was the meeting?" Mimi says. Alan stares at her. "I'm reminding you to ask me how my meeting was," she says.

He blinks, looking for the thread of this conversation. "Oh!" he says. "Sorry. It was good?"

"Well, it was informative." She cranes her neck to yell, even though Alix is five feet away. "Alix, honey, you're going to keep your hair long, right?"

There's a pause. "I guess?"

Mimi leans in to Alan. "The counselor's in line. I scared the bejesus out of her."

Alan bowed to her. "As you do."

"Right. It's just--" Mimi motions for him to follow into the kitchen. Which, she realizes, is hilarious, as the downstairs is basically one big small room, with an L of uninsulated drywall separating the kitchen/dining area from the living room/hallway. And big, open doorways on either end of the L.

In the kitchen, she goes on, whispering: "Okay, it's just...the body situation is changing maybe a little sooner than we'd expected."

There's that stare again.

"Boobs and butts, Alan. Girls are maturing earlier. The counselor made it sound like half the eighth grade girls look like they're auditioning for a hip-hop video."

"Jesus," says Alan. He looks stricken. And this is the double bitch of the situation: Not only does Mimi have to deal with the fact that her only son, her baby boy, was born the wrong way, but also with the fact that *that* fact still makes her husband almost physically ill. He's a liberal guy, her Alan. He never had any problem when Alix/Stephen was in nursery school and would come home, throw off his clothes, and climb into his witch costume, the one with the black wig fastened to the inside of the pointy hat for an instant transformation, the act soothing the lines on Stephen's face the way his pacifier used to. Alan would've been perfectly happy with a regular old gay son.

"Well, wait," he says now. "How's this a problem for us? Boys develop slower than girls, right? We still have time."

She puts a hand on his shoulder. "Welcome to the conversation, hon. She's going to feel like Olive Oyl in a school full of Betty Boops. Or Salma Hayeks, from what the counselor's telling me. We need to talk to Dr. Wiener."

Dr. Wiener is their man in New York. He's the east coast's best gender-reassignment guy, the man with the power to prescribe and (later) to perform the procedures. He was the med-school roommate of Alix's psychiatrist. His name has long since stopped being a source of fun for Mimi and Alan.

"Jesus," Alan says again, shoving his fingers back and forth through his hair. "This is way too early. You're really gonna call Wiener in?"

"Yes, Alan, because that's what we do. We say we're going to do something and then we do it. Are you on board, or no?"

He steps back. "Why is this suddenly a fucking SEAL mission?"

"You know what?" says Mimi. "It's fine. I'll take care of this appointment and you can swoop in later and pick up hair bands and nail polish on your way back from somewhere, and you'll still get to be World's Best Transgender Dad."

He rolls his eyes, an action that makes her glad the tea kettle's out of her reach.

"Should it be bronze or marble?" Alan says.

"Should what?"

"Your weeping martyr statue."

Alix calls from the living room, "I can totally hear you guys. Can you maybe move to a room with doors or something?"

There's an annual convention for kids like Alix. It's in Seattle. Three days of peace and love and empathy, as the man once wrote. Mimi's been through their website hundreds of times. There are workshops and lectures with kind-looking mental health professionals, slide shows of happy looking boy-girls and girl-boys splashing in a hotel pool. It should be a no-brainer, except Mimi has never mentioned it to Alix nor Alan. (Not a hard feat, this last one: He works hard to navigate the topography of Alix's world so that he doesn't have to think too hard about the geology.) Some parents would feel endless comfort to find other kids who were going through the same experience. To Mimi, it just seems cruel. Have a great three days? Feel accepted and normal? Great, see you next year! Have fun in school!

The coffee run has turned into a visit to the nail salon downtown. In a place called Happy Nail, Mimi and Alix sit side by side in huge pink molded-plastic chairs with back-massaging mechanisms in them and little spa tubs attached for washing the feet. The Korean ladies -- there are fifteen of them whirring around among the giant chairs and tiny tables -- don't gawk or titter at Alix, which is why Mimi doesn't mind spending the money to be here. Instead, they treat her like a preadolescent girl, giving her conspiratorial winks as they offer shades of nail polish they must know are kind of slutty.

She realizes Alix has been speaking to her.

"What, honey?"

"I said, I heard what you guys were talking about at home. Like, every word?"

"Oh." Mimi starts to offer a lie, but stops. "I'm sorry. My parents always fought in the house, and I hated it." In fact, she used to hold her hands over her ears and scream until they stopped. And they usually did, because she'd made it clear she could always scream louder and longer than anyone, if necessary.

"I don't care about fighting," Alix says. "But the body stuff? You know I heard that, too."

"Oh. Of course."

"I'm gonna start to look weird next to everybody else," says Alix in her big chair. "Like, *soon*."

"I didn't say that. Did I say that?"

"I'm saying that."

The woman working on Mimi's toes is using the cuticle pusher now. Pedicures are something Mimi somehow never did until last year, when Stephen became Alix. Anyone who imagines manicures and pedicures are relaxing, like having a nice backrub, is mistaken, thinks Mimi. They're very stabby procedures.

"Okay, well, Alix, there are some things we're going to have to consider sooner rather than later."

"Like?"

Like the depression rate for male-to-female transgenders--but she can't even finish the thought. "Surely you've imagined this," says Mimi. "You've known it was coming."

Blank stare. Like father, like former son.

"Alix, we're going to have to talk about medication, is what I'm saying. Hormone therapy. A little earlier than we'd planned. A lot earlier. But it's okay. I've already left a message for Dr. Wiener this morning."

"Will it hurt?" Alix says suddenly.

"What, honey?"

"The surgery. Is it gonna hurt?"

Mimi is staring at the flesh-colored lawn rakes at the ends of Alix's skinny legs. That'll be the craziest thing about full-girl Alix: No matter what they do to her, she'll always have the manliest feet in the family. At age eleven, she's one shoe size smaller than her father. Her big toes are like a gravedigger's thumbs.

"No one's talking about surgery yet, sweetie. That's not how it goes." But Mimi's been thinking about it. She pictures a tall, blonde girl, an ivy-league bombshell, sitting up in a white recovery bed. That girl doesn't look like Alix, really, but she has her same eleven-year-old voice: *Hi, Mom.* Mimi shakes it off.

"That's a relief," says Alix. "I'm not ready for all that. It'll hurt after. Or I could die? Like, on the table? That happened to someone on the medical channel I watch."

"Jesus, they showed that?"

"Well, they used actors to show how it went."

"Those kinds of mistakes are very rare, honey. Usually it's because the person has what's called a pre-existing condition."

"Ha! This one was because the anesthetic was done wrong." Alix smiles, her face full of triumph.

"Alix, sweetie, what's your point here?"

Alix straightens in her seat. The pedicurist slaps her on the calf. "Sorry," says Alix. "My point, Mom, is it's a miracle anyone makes it out of those places alive."

Mimi has to look away. Her smirk will only reward this kind of talk. But she can't help it: Alix has been a fifty-year-old suburban lady since she was three, full of suspicions and unfounded theories. It's funny to look back now and try and imagine any other path for her young son. If his mistaken gender hadn't already made him different, his vocabulary, his phrasing, his lisp wouldn't have done him any favors.

The ladies at their feet are done, and Mimi and Alix get up and heel-walk to separate tables for the manicure portion of the treatment. Mimi sits two tables behind Alix and watches the back of her daughter's hair, which is tangled and bumpy from too little showering and too much couch.

"What color are you getting?" Alix calls over her shoulder. "I'm getting Sin City Red!"

Out on the street, it's a hot, blinding afternoon. Everyone's in shorts and tank tops and flip flops. Mimi's in loose yoga pants and a baggy t-shirt, for which she is both grateful and ashamed. She used to go to the gym, regularly-ish. When was this? she wonders. But she knows the answer: anytime before Stephen became Alix. Alan says she still looks good, but she was getting undressed in their bedroom recently, and when she turned around he was looking at her midsection, his mouth a grim line, the expression of a contractor assessing a ruptured pipe in someone's front yard. But it's not like one of those TV marriages where the couple never touches each other anymore. They have a time almost every week where they shove their naked bodies at

each other and say filthy things. Mimi loves sex, always has, without shame or hang-ups. But sometimes, lately and at the very wrongest moments, she wonders how (if) Alix will be able to feel anything.

"Mom, look!" Alix is pointing across the street. Mimi's heart freezes: there's a pack of kids coming down the sidewalk, a half-dozen of them. They're schoolmates, girls and boys who used to make fun of Alix when she was the little boy in kindergarten who insisted on wearing a bow tie every day.

"Okay," says Mimi, clutching for her daughter's hand. "Let's just--"

"Can I go say hi?"

"What? Um...."

One of the kids sees them from across the street. "Stephen!" he yells. One of the girls whacks him. "I mean, Alix!"

Alix's face flickers, then lights again. "I'll be right back," she tells Mimi.

Mimi starts: "Oh, hon--" but Alix already has a foot in the street. The next moment happens in awful slow-mo clarity. The car approaches too fast from the left. The driver's looking at his cell phone. Mimi opens her mouth to yell to Alix. The driver glances up and slams on his brakes, stopping less than a foot from Alix's legs. The guy leans on his horn, swearing at her through his windshield. Alix gives him a goofy, apologetic wave, and hurries across to the kids on the other side. The driver moves off, giving a final, pissy beep, and Mimi is left standing on the sidewalk, not having saved her child from a hurtling piece of machinery nor having even laid into the driver for nearly slaughtering her kid and then having the gall to blame Alix for his own idiocy. She's another worthless bystander.

Mimi watches from her side of the street as Alix and the kids chat for a bit. Alix shows them her nails, splaying out her long fingers (and thumby toes) for all to see. One of the girls, a tiny thing named Tori, makes a habit of touching Alix on the back periodically, and Mimi realizes she's probably feeling for evidence of a bra. Tori's already been on Mimi's danger-radar this summer for her curse-filled Facebook posts. None of it directed at Alix, but a girl that bold at eleven was not the one you'd want turning on you later.

Mimi used to have friends. They're either creeped out by Alix and don't want to say so, or they've been driven off by Mimi's rants and rages about teachers, school administrators, psychologists, strangers in stores, and all the others. Knowing this, she made herself show up at book club just this past month. They were delighted to see her! they said. And she could talk about the book, a novel she'd read and quite liked about a lonely librarian who falls in love with a teenage boy who's growing uncontrollably taller. But when it came time for small talk, Mimi found she was an empty sack. Am I smiling enough? she thought. How about now? Am I smiling too much?

She waits for the tormenting to begin across the street, for the smiles to turn deeper, meaner. It seems to go on forever. Finally, Alix turns back to Mimi and the group starts to slink its way down the sidewalk again. Mimi stares past her daughter, forcing her eyes to zero in and focus like binoculars, looking for any sign of taunting or teasing. But the kids just call out an overlapping set of niceties: "Bye, Alix!" and "Later, kid!" and "See you in two weeks!" No one turns back and snickers, no one leans in and whispers to each other.

Mimi's hands suddenly ache, and she realizes she's got them pulled into tight fists at the sides of her thighs.

Alix gets back to their side of the street, having looked both ways this time. "Thanks, Mom!" She hugs Mimi, who's still got her hands at her sides, arms as straight and tense as rebar.

Mimi has a feeling in her, something she can't name. Anxiety? Too general. Dread? Not quite it, either. Before she can find the label for it, she is grabbing her daughter by the shoulders.

"Don't you ever rush into the street like that, do you hear me?"

Alix goes pale. "I didn't--"

"You're goddamn right you didn't. You will look both ways next time, are we clear?"

Her daughter looks around, cheeks reddening. Over Alix's shoulder, Mimi can see some of the kids down the street looking back at them now. Somewhere inside, beneath the swirl of still-unnamable feelings, Mimi thinks: Am I shouting?

Alix narrows her eyes at her mother. "Take me home," she growls.

The day of the consultation with Dr. Wiener, Mimi sleeps through her alarm. She wakes to find her bed empty, tendrils of coffee-smell tugging at her through the open door. Downstairs, she finds Alan has made what's known in the household as The Big Breakfast: waffles from scratch, fake bacon, fake sausage, real eggs, sliced oranges, and a fresh-berry/syrup concoction Mimi knows takes an hour to reduce and thicken.

"Today's not a weekend," Mimi says from the kitchen doorway.

"Isn't it, though?" says Alan, and he swoops over in his bright green Christmas apron to kiss her on the cheek. They'd had middle-of-the-night sex -- anxiety sex -- after she'd woken to find his leg over hers and her own hand down the front of his shorts. It was quiet and hot-

mouthed and fantastic, and while it was happening she did not think about anything but what they were doing and how good it felt.

"Sit," says Alan. "Eat." He hands her a cup of coffee and pats her bottom toward the table.

Alix is there, her plate displaying the aftermath of a decisive battle between growing child and huge breakfast; only a shining lake of brackish berry juice remains, pink crumbs of veggie bacon scattered in it like wreckage. She's wearing a white, peasant-style top which Mimi recognizes as a back-to-school item. She considers mentioning this, but instead goes with: "And how are we this morning?"

"We're okay," nods Alix dully. She's been like this. It's clear she's still pissed about the street incident the other day. Kid can hold a grudge, thinks Mimi. That's women for you.

"We're okay, but we're stumped," says Alan. "We've been trying to remember the name of the cloud city in *The Empire Strikes Back*."

Mimi looks at her daughter, then at her husband. "And?"

"And," says Alan, "we've gone through all the locations, all six films. Alix even remembered Coruscant from Episode One, which is of course the birth city of Princess Amadala and thus the galactic epicenter of wooden acting."

"Jesus, those movies are awful," says Mimi. Since Alix (Stephen) was five, *Star Wars* has been shared sacred ground for Alan and her. Not that Mimi hasn't heard all of it, every repeat viewing, from her place on the periphery.

"Okay," says Alan, looking suddenly chastened. He's been a lifelong *Star Wars* fan. "They are pretty goofy, I guess."

And here she realizes: He was throwing her a line, something to help her engage with Alix. "But they're not as awful as your memories," Mimi says. She waits until they're both staring at her. "It's Bepin, dummies."

Alan slaps himself on the forehead. "Bepin!" He's a terrible actor. Still: Alix looks at her mom and rolls her eyes, and the grudge is magically dismantled.

Dr. Wiener isn't on Mimi's side this time. Which makes her think: Was he ever?

"I don't see the rush," he says. Wiener's tall, in his early fifties, his body a collection of long sticks in a fine yellow shirt and gray slacks. His head is shaved to a smoothness Mimi right now finds infuriating. They're in his SoHo office -- Mimi, Alan, and Alix -- with his tall, vintage glass-front cabinet and a shelf full of plastic genitalia. A long, burlled walnut desk is slabbed out between the Ackers and the doctor.

Alan speaks first. "What would *you* recommend, Doc?"

Mimi stares at her husband. He stares back. She turns to Wiener, who, frankly, has less power in their lives than the school board, and look what Mimi's done with *them*. Wiener might be the best, but there are other doctors. "You say no rush," says Mimi. "Meanwhile, we're looking down the barrel of a gun here."

"Oh, jeez," says Alan.

"Mo-om," moans Alix.

Dr. Wiener, looks back and forth between them through a crinkle-eyed smile. "That's a bit over the top, don't you think?"

"Is it?" says Mimi. "I've thought about this. What's the period in your life that most shapes who you are as an adult? Your sexuality, your coping skills, your peer relationships, your personality? Adolescence. What's the one thing most transgenders miss out on? A proper adolescence -- the one their actual selves would have lived."

Dr. Wiener leans back in his desk chair. "Well, that's because most adolescents tend to be children."

"Don't be smart with me."

The smile again. "I'm not being mean. Your daughter here is twelve?"

"Next month I am," says Alix. "You know, can I just--"

Wiener puts up a finger. "Hang on, sweetie." To Alan and Mimi, he says, "Let me ask you this: Is she driving you guys home today?"

Mimi wants to smash his serene little smirk. "Of course she isn't."

"Why?"

Mimi folds her arms. Alan answers. "Because a car is a dangerous vehicle."

"A car," says Dr. Wiener, "is not half as dangerous as a teenage brain. And we're not even truly dealing with a teenager yet. This is a preadolescent." He knocks on his desk-slab. "Go home. You guys are doing a great job. You don't need me for a few years yet."

To Alix, he says, "Hang in there, kiddo."

The doctor and Alan and Alix are on their feet. Mimi stays seated. "Is that your recommendation, or your final say on the matter?"

Wiener looks between Mimi and her family, his cheeks reddening. He says, softly, "It's my refusal, Mimi. It wouldn't be ethical." He puts a hand on hers. "And it isn't personal."

"Easy for you to say."

"Meem," says Alan.

She stands up. "Fine, we're done here. So glad we're driving three hours each way for this bullshit."

"Thank God," breathes Alix, and she and Alan head out the door.

Alone in the office, Mimi faces Dr. Wiener from across his huge, dumb desk. "This is why people go to Europe for this stuff. And why American medicine is a laughingstock around the world."

He smiles at her still, though just barely. He leans in and whispers, "I get this a lot in my job, you know. I can handle it. I just feel bad for the person who gets your lunch order wrong."

Mimi and Alan stand in the waiting area while Alix uses the restroom. (There are two bathroom doors just off the lobby, and Mimi has watched as Alix hesitated, leaning for one, then the other. Neither door says Men or Women on it.) Dr. Wiener walks back and forth behind the receptionist's area, pulling folders from drawers and quietly dictating instructions to the young woman behind the desk. He seems calm, but Mimi spots a certain quickness to his movements that wasn't there before. She's rattled him. She imagines him calling her in a few hours, or a few days. "You know your daughter best," he'll say. "I was letting my own definition of 'normal' get in the way. Let's do the therapy."

But Dr. Wiener comes back around the reception desk and puts a hand on Alan and Mimi's outer arms, the way a minister might greet parishioners after a sermon. "In addition to

what I said in our consultation, I'd like to add one thing: The more we take time and let Alix catch up with the technology, the less we have to hope the technology will catch up with Alix."

Alan is nodding. "That makes sense," he says.

Dr. Wiener squeezes Alan's shoulder. "You're holding up well, Dad. I see a lot of single moms in here, if you know what I mean. Male brain's got a lot more rigidity, a lot more cultural insulation that doesn't allow for certain kinds of empathies to take root."

Mimi stands there, slackmouthed. "Yes, let's congratulate each other for being the good guys. Meanwhile, you just sentenced my daughter to an adolescence full of terror and heartache. Good going." Dr. Wiener stares at her a moment, then turns and disappears down the corridor behind Alan. That's right, thinks Mimi, scurry back to your office.

"When did this become an all-or-nothing proposition?" says Alan. "And when did she become *your* daughter?"

And that's it, right there. She sees everything now, with a sad clarity. He doesn't get it, or doesn't want to get it. There's something like a net stretched between them now, and what Alan has just said sits in the middle, weighing it down. It is exhausting, she thinks, to be this family, and fair enough. But it should not be equally exhausting to be this couple.

"Look," Alan says. "I know you're super-invested in this whole thing, but I think it's kind of killing you. And it's only been a year, babe. What's it gonna be like in five? Alix'll be driving by then. Are you going to go on all her dates? Are you gonna sit in the car during driving lessons and yell at the guy if he's not being respectful enough to *your* child?"

Mimi gives him a look, one half-lidded and filled with contempt. "If that's what it takes," she says.

"If that's what *what* takes? Sometimes I think you don't even know what the 'it' is."

Dr. Wiener appears at the mouth of the hallway. He leans over the reception desk.

"Greta," Mimi hears him whisper to the receptionist. "Do you have the keys to my office?"

Alan isn't done. "I feel like we're all on this crazy contraption you've built, and we're all just hurtling along on it with no idea where we're going. And you just keep nailing stuff onto it."

Mimi nods, watching Dr. Wiener and Greta head down the hallway to solve the Mystery Of the Doctor Who Locked Himself Out. "Yeah," she says, "and that's what a family is, Alan. It's a contraption of your own making that goes where it's going, not a pre-fab thing on a perfect track or whatever. Are you on this thing or are you off?"

Alan shakes his head. "Fuck you for even asking that."

Mimi opens her mouth to respond, and Dr. Wiener reappears at the mouth of the hallway. He wears the expression of someone who's just stepped off a rickety elevator.

"Where's your daughter?"

"She's in the bathroom," shrugs Mimi.

"No, she's not," calls Greta from somewhere behind Dr. Wiener.

They all run to Wiener's office and its closed door. The pit of Mimi's stomach fills with a hot, liquid dread.

Dr. Wiener knocks softly on the door. "Alix? You in there, kiddo?"

Alix's voice comes plainly through the door. "No."

Dr. Wiener smiles at Alan and Mimi. *Seen this a thousand times*, the smile says. Mimi allows herself to feel a little better. "Can we come in?" says Wiener.

"No," says the voice of Alix.

Mimi steps up to the door. "Alix, come out here right now."

"Okay, kiddo," laughs the doctor, knocking again.

"Don't you have a key?" says Alan.

"Sure I do," Wiener says grimly. "In my coat pocket. Behind my desk."

"You don't have an extra?" Alan says. Mimi is unable to speak. She just keeps thinking

Billy Bibbitt, Billy Bibbitt, Billy Bibbitt.

Dr. Wiener knocks again, much harder this time. "No extra key," he says. "Not here, anyway."

"We would, if you trusted me more," says Greta.

"There are pharmaceuticals in there. It's a legal issue."

At the word *pharmaceuticals*, Alan steps up and pounds on the door. "Alix! Alix, goddammit, come out!"

"The pharmaceutical cabinet has its own key," says Greta. "So why don't I at least have an office key? You think I'm a moron."

Mimi finally breaks the bubble of silence clogging her throat. "Is there anything sharp in there?"

Dr. Wiener thinks, his eyes searching the space above Mimi's head. They go wide with terror, and Mimi knows he's picturing the same pool of blood she's been picturing. She's grateful for this man and his height as he steps back and raises one of his giraffe legs to kick at the door.

Except: There's a click and the door swings gently open before Wiener's foot connects, and he stumbles in. Alix stands just inside. There is no pool of blood. There is a pool of golden-blond hair, on the floor in front of Wiener's glass-front cabinet. Alix has a pair of long, gleaming

scissors in one hand. She's made it through all her bangs and just over half her hair, so that there's blonde thatch sticking out over one ear while the other side remains long. It looks like a mullet wig that's been twisted sideways.

"I'm sorry!" she blurts, and she sounds so small, so young. So much like an eleven-year-old child. She tosses the scissors onto the big desk as if they were suddenly very hot.

Dr. Wiener is the first to speak. He is sweaty and red-faced. He swallows hard -- surely the same pasty heat Mimi feels in her own throat. "You, uh, doing okay, kiddo?" he says.

"My mom's right," says Alix.

Mimi pushes down the triumph. "Honey, then why are you doing this?" Through a curtain of tears she sees the fragile eyes staring back at her, so she switches gears, forcing out a smile at her half-a-daughter. "Seems kinda backwardsville, don't ya think?"

"No, about teenage years and stuff. I don't want to go through any of that. No way."

"You sure about this, kiddo?" says Dr. Wiener. "Ten minutes ago we were talking about female hormones."

Alix smiles shyly, goofily, and gives a shrug. With her hair half-off and her cheeks so red, she looks almost cartoonishly boyish. And younger. It's almost as if she's trimmed away all temporal evidence of the past year. And what's her explanation for this? What's the rationale for just snipping away everything they'd worked for? A shrug. Like any kid being asked what he'd thought of the movie. How's school going this year, buddy? (Shrug.) How are your parents? (Shrug.) Weren't you trying to become a girl? (Shrug.)

Mimi can hear the parting of lips beside her, the unmistakable sound of her husband breaking into a smile, and she thinks: You son of a bitch. She turns to face her newest enemy. But he isn't smiling. He's crying, hard and silent, lips twisted into an awful grimace.

"It's okay, Dad," says Dr. Wiener, and he puts an arm around Alan. Alix -- Stephen -- stares at the floor, eyes bugged out in mortification. He's a boy who's decided he doesn't want to play the piano they spent so much money renting for him. And now he's waiting for the adults to decide his punishment. Just as soon as Dad can stop bawling.

These adults, they all stand in the middle of Dr. Wiener's office, the good doctor still sweating, Alan blubbering like a widower beside Mimi, their son's expensive hairdo -- his aborted girlhood, Mimi's every waking goddamn moment from the last year -- lying there in wait for the office cleaning lady. And suddenly Mimi finds the name for the awful thing she was feeling on the street that day, watching Alix's friends as they moved on down the sidewalk without teasing or whispering about her son-turned-daughter. As though it were already normal to them and they'd just needed a second to adjust. Stephen is Alix now? Okay. (Shrug.)

The thing she'd felt at that moment? Disappointment. She'd been ready to lunge across the street and scream at those little shits, or call their mothers: *Do you know your child is a homophobe and a bully?* But...nothing. Her finely honed fury was simply not needed. And it was so *disappointing*.

She will be the mother he needs, always. Mimi knows this, in the throbbing cavern that is her chest; in the taut muscles that web her upper back and ache always; in the high-speed railway of her veins. Three years from now, when he wants to go with a boy to the movies and she knows the boy is all wrong for him -- clench-mouthed, confused, cruel -- she will drive them

nonetheless. This is around the same time she will go back to work, operating from home as a PR consultant for nonprofits run by people she worked alongside in the era B.C. (Before Child.) Four years from now, she will be removed from a school board meeting after calling the superintendent an incompetent asshole for keeping the high school on a 7AM start time. (Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting later school hours for teenagers!) And ten years from now, she will sit in this very office, holding hands with Alan as Dr. Wiener passes a small white sample bottle across his desk to Alix S. Acker and says, "Take these with a muffin or something, kiddo. Some people say they can be rough on an empty stomach." Mimi will do all this and more. But right now she wants to kill him.

She moves on her son. He smiles up at her from beneath lopsided, storybook-peasant bangs. He puts his arms out for a hug. Mama! Your lost little boy is back! I had the most curious adventure! Mimi grabs the front of his blouse and holds him there. With the other hand, she snatches the scissors off the desk.

"Meem!" Alan yells, but it's too late. Mimi shoves the blades through the long flap of hair over Alix's right ear.

"Ow!" he yells.

"Don't even," Mimi grunts, and he goes quiet. The flap now on the floor with the rest of the hair she'd tended for a year like a prize garden, Mimi goes to work neatening what she can around both ears and in back. The front isn't actually all that bad. When she's done, at least for now, she puts the scissors back on the desk and takes her child's smooth face in her hands. He looks up at her with huge, terrified eyes.

"This is what you want?"

Alix stares at her. "I don't know," he says softly.

"Well, are you a boy or a girl in there?"

Tears fill his eyes. "I don't know."

"Can we still get our nails done together sometimes?"

He laughs, and a snot bubble balloons out of one nostril. "Maybe?" he says, wiping it away. What he doesn't catch, Mimi gets with the cuff of her shirt.

"Okay," breathes Mimi. "Here's what we're gonna do."

And she starts to tell him the new plan for grade six.

About the Author

Matt Debenham is the author of *The Book of Right and Wrong* (2010, OSU Press), which won the 2009 Ohio State University Press Prize for fiction. He was a Peter Taylor Scholar at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and has received a fiction fellowship from the Connecticut Council on Culture and Tourism. His fiction has been published in *Roanoke Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *The Pinch*, *The Battered Suitcase*, and others. "The Advocate" was a finalist in *Narrative* magazine's Fall 2011 Story Contest. He teaches writing in Westport, CT.

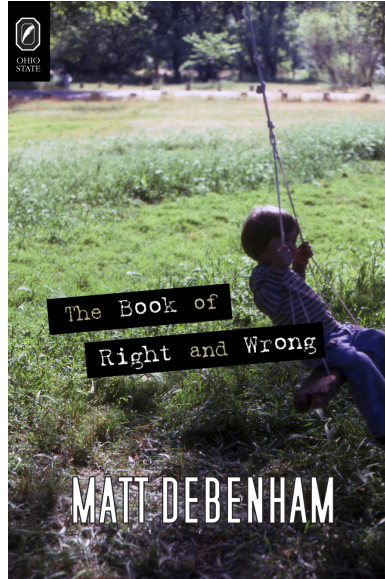
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A Suggestion

If you liked this story, why not buy *The Book of Right and Wrong*, available in paperback and Kindle?



The Book of Right and Wrong received a book-of-the-week endorsement on Slate’s Culture Gabfest podcast (May 26, 2010 edition). Here’s what a few others said:

“Debenham exposes specific turning points in lives so real and so engaging that my own life felt transformed -- illuminated -- by the changes wrought in the lives of the characters.”

Nina Sankovitch, *Huffington Post Books* (May 25, 2010)

“Matt Debenham’s collection *The Book of Right and Wrong* has everything I look for in a reading experience: engaging characters, compelling stories, and universal themes. But the unexpected moments were what I appreciated most—when I laughed out loud or paused to reread a lyrical sentence or put the book down to think not just about the characters’ lives but about my own. These stories are funny and heartbreaking and dark all at once, yet somehow the author manages to achieve an effortless feeling of interconnectedness, one story flowing into the next. Debenham writes about the forgotten, the offbeat, and the outcast in his beautifully unconventional way, giving voices to those who often go unheard. This is a stunning debut from a distinctive new presence in American storytelling, among the best collections I have read.” — Amy Greene, author of *Bloodroot*

Outrageous, tender, hilarious, bewildered: Matt Debenham’s *The Book of Right and Wrong* is so full of life that it’s a miracle the binding can hold it all together. A spectacular debut. —Paul Lisicky, author of *Lawnboy* and *Famous Builder*

“Matt Debenham writes people you could swear you’ve actually met, and your heart goes out to each and every one of them. Even the sonsofbitches.” —Paul F. Tompkins, Comedian

“Inside this book is a universe of painfully nerdy kids and dangerously flawed parents who love each other so much and so badly they would do anything for each other, including lie, maim, and kill. Matt Debenham explores the paradoxical territory of the rights and wrongs of parenthood with sensitivity, compassion, intelligence, and a dark humor that never shies away from love’s unending contradiction. Precise prose, daring narrative turns, rueful humor, knife-to-the-gut vulnerability, and a deeply human regard for even the most compromised characters—there are so many reasons to love this book. —Pam Houston, Author of *Cowboys Are My Weakness* and *Sight Hound*