



## Autobiography, Transsexual

by Brett Genny Beemyn

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Over the last 75 years, transsexual individuals have published autobiographies not only to tell or to clarify the stories of their lives, but also to educate others in an effort to gain greater acceptance for transgender people.

Many of the early autobiographies were written by transsexual women whose gender identities had been revealed by the press. Forced into the media spotlight because they were transsexual, their work often served as a response to the stereotypes and misinformation circulated about their experiences.

But in the last decade, as the existence of transsexual individuals has become less of a novelty to much of society, transsexual women autobiographers have been able to shift their focus from challenging sensationalized portrayals of their personal lives to creating a public image that reflects how they understand their gender identities.

Although comparatively fewer autobiographies have been published by transsexual men as opposed to transsexual women, a growing number of such works in the last few years has led to a greater recognition of the diversity of transsexual identities.

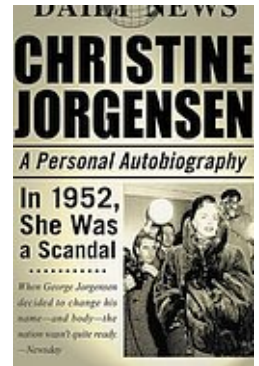
### Early Transsexual Autobiographies

Given the unprecedented news coverage that Christine Jorgensen received beginning in 1952 for being the first person from the United States publicly known to have had a "sex change," it is not surprising that her 1967 life story would be the most widely known among the early transsexual autobiographies.

But the earliest transsexual autobiographies were actually published by Europeans. The first known book-length account is the narrative of Lili Elbe, a male-born Danish painter who began to identify and live as a woman in the 1920s and had a series of gender confirming surgeries.

Shortly before her apparent death in 1931, Elbe's transition became public, creating a media sensation in Europe. To provide a more accurate rendering of her life, Elbe requested that her friend Ernst Ludwig Hathorn Jacobson develop a book based on her diary entries, letters, and dictated material. Jacobson published the resulting work, *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*, in 1933 under the pseudonym Niels Hoyer.

After *Man into Woman*, another transsexual autobiography was apparently not published until 1954, when two works were written by transsexual Britons in the wake of the international publicity surrounding Jorgensen's transition. Robert Allen's *But for the Grace: The True Story of a Dual Existence* describes how he was assigned female at birth, but petitioned the British government to amend his birth certificate in 1944--one of the country's earliest officially recognized gender changes--and legally married a woman. Allen states that he did not take hormones or have surgery.



The cover of the Cleis Press edition of Christine Jorgensen's widely-read autobiography. Courtesy Cleis Press.

In contrast, *Roberta Cowell's Story by Herself* is an account by the woman who had the first known vaginoplasty (surgical creation of a vagina) in England and who was legally recognized as female in 1951. Being the first British transsexual woman to undergo surgery and having achieved some fame previously as a race car driver, Cowell's transition made headlines in Britain, and excerpts from her autobiography were serialized in one of the country's celebrity magazines.

The outing of London model and socialite April Ashley as transsexual a decade later generated similar interest in Britain. As recounted in her 1982 autobiography, Ashley experienced an even greater public indignity when her husband was successfully granted a divorce by arguing in court that their marriage was never valid because Ashley had been registered as male at birth.

But the sensational press coverage that Cowell and Ashley faced paled in comparison to the media frenzy that followed the news of Jorgensen's transition. As Jorgensen recounts in her autobiography, the media attention she faced was so relentless that she was unable to have the normal life she had sought by having gender confirming surgeries. Whether she desired to or not, she had little choice but to turn to a career in the public eye. In doing so, Jorgensen brought the concept of gender transformation into homes throughout the world and helped many transsexual women in the 1950s and 1960s recognize and understand themselves.

### **Transsexual Autobiographies, 1974-1983**

In the 1970s, the headline-news coverage that accompanied the transitions of Jan Morris, Renée Richards, and, to a lesser extent, Nancy Hunt raised still greater awareness of transsexual women. Morris, a renowned British author and travel correspondent, described in *Conundrum* (1974) how she sublimated her gender identity through movement until she could no longer avoid undertaking the more difficult inner journey to accept herself.

Renée Richards achieved international notoriety when she was denied the opportunity to play professional women's tennis in the United States in the mid-1970s by the sport's governing bodies because she had received a male gender assignment at birth. Richards won the right to compete professionally as a woman, thus opening the door for other transsexual women, but her autobiography, *Second Serve* (1983), surprisingly spends little time discussing her court case or her pro tennis career. Instead, Richards devotes the majority of her memoir to discussing her struggle to accept her gender identity, which included three failed attempts to live as a man before she was finally able to acknowledge herself as a woman.

In comparison to Morris and Richards, U.S. journalist Nancy Hunt was less well-known both before and after her transition, and her autobiography, *Mirror Image* (1978), did not receive as much publicity as earlier transsexual narratives. Nevertheless, the work was groundbreaking, as more than previous memoirists, Hunt was willing to discuss her romantic life. In particular, she describes her relationship with her second wife, who was initially supportive but ultimately could not accept being involved with another woman.

While the well-publicized autobiographies by Jorgensen, Morris, and Richards drew attention to the experiences of transsexual women, the lack of published narratives by transsexual men meant that their lives remained largely invisible from the 1960s through the 1980s.

One notable exception is *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (1977), Mario Martino's account of his struggles to reconcile his sense of himself as male with his conservative Catholic upbringing. Just as Cowell, Morris, Hunt, and many other transsexual women pursued traditionally masculine occupations and/or joined the military in order to conform to societal gender expectations and to try to escape their inner turmoil, so Martino entered a convent school, hoping to suppress his feelings and be more like a young woman. Not surprisingly, he was unsuccessful. Thereafter, Martino decided that he could not go through life as female

and, adopting a concept from his religious upbringing, described being "born again" after having a mastectomy (surgical removal of breasts) and then phalloplasty (surgical creation of a penis).

### **Contemporary Transsexual Autobiographies**

In the 1990s, the publication of Leslie Feinberg's semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Kate Bornstein's collection of personal essays and performance works *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (1994) helped a new generation of transsexual individuals see and better understand themselves.

In contrast to previous narratives, Feinberg's and Bornstein's texts are more overtly political, in that they forcefully argue for transgender rights and challenge binary gender categories.

Feinberg tells her early life story through the character of Jess Goldberg, a transgender youth who came out as a butch lesbian in the blue-collar factories and bars of the 1950s and 1960s, transitioned to male in order to survive during the early 1970s, and subsequently became someone who blurred gender boundaries.

Like Jess, Bornstein's "outlaw" status stemmed in part from her refusal to identify as either female or male at a time when few transgender writers were willing to claim that they were anything but one or another gender extreme. Bornstein calls into question the traditional transsexual paradigm of feeling "trapped in the wrong body," transitioning to one's "right" gender, and no longer seeing oneself as transsexual.

The popularity of Feinberg's and Bornstein's works, along with the rise of a transgender political and social movement and the growing visibility of transgender communities, led publishers to take a greater interest in transgender books, and an unprecedented number of transsexual autobiographies were published in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Among the most significant narratives by transsexual women published at this time are Deirdre McCloskey's *Crossing: A Memoir* (1999) and Jennifer Finney Boylan's *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (2003).

Many transsexual autobiographers relate a similar story: from their earliest memories feeling themselves to be very different from others of their assigned gender, while growing up expressing themselves whenever possible as that different gender, learning about and meeting others of their gender identity, and eventually transitioning to their appropriate gender. McCloskey, however, constructed what she describes in *Crossing* as "a psychological dam against the realization, which suddenly [broke] . . . in mature adulthood."

The revelation not only surprised McCloskey, but also shocked members of her family, especially her sister, who twice had McCloskey forcibly committed for psychological examination. Fortunately for McCloskey, a leading U.S. economics professor, she had the support and the financial resources to overcome her sister's interference and was able to maintain her career after transitioning. But, as she describes in an especially moving section of her autobiography, McCloskey's marriage ended in a bitter divorce and her children no longer have contact with her.

Jennifer Finney Boylan, a professor of English at a small New England college and a comic novelist, likewise received a largely supportive response from academic colleagues and students. But unlike McCloskey, Boylan was also able to maintain her marriage after transitioning, and with her wife, she continues to raise two children.

Another major difference between the lives of McCloskey and Boylan is how they express their gender identities. McCloskey states that she carefully seeks to present herself as female to avoid being read as male by birth and rejected as not a "real woman." In contrast, Boylan recognizes that she retains a number of "masculine" traits, such as playing in a rock band and telling jokes, but refuses to be ashamed of these

interests. She notes that many other women engage in these pursuits as well, and that such activities are only considered to be gender markers because of her transsexual history.

## **Trans Men**

The late 1990s and early 2000s also saw a spate of autobiographies published by transsexual men, beginning with Mark Rees's *Dear Sir or Madam* (1996).

Rees sought to enter the Anglican priesthood, but was denied admittance because, using the judgment in April Ashley's case, the British government considered him female, and the church at that time did not ordain women. In response, Rees brought the government before the European Court of Human Rights. Although the court ruled against him in 1986, Rees recounts in his autobiography that he felt liberated. As a result of publicity about the case, he no longer had to live in fear that others would discover his past.

Perhaps because relatively few narratives have been published by transsexual men, two recent autobiographies seek to inform readers about trans male lives in general, and not just the authors' own experiences.

In *Becoming a Visible Man* (2004), Jamison Green describes the process by which he acknowledged and accepted himself as a man in the 1980s and 1990s within the context of the development of a U.S. trans male community, in which he became a leader. Discussing his experiences and feelings along with the concerns of other transsexual men, Green devotes chapters to medical treatment; relationships with parents, children, and partners; and societal images and stereotypes.

Matt Kailey's *Just Add Hormones: An Insider's Guide to the Transsexual Experience* (2005) is also a helpful introductory text for readers unfamiliar with the lives of trans men. Kailey makes good use of his background as a social worker and middle-school English teacher by writing an engaging and accessible autobiography. Particularly insightful is Kailey's discussion of how he was treated differently when he was seen as a man instead of as a woman.

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### **About the Author**

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.