

THREE FOR THOUGHT » WHAT YOU NEED TO READ ABOUT ... SEX CHANGES

## Free to be she – or he

Even if you don't think you're trapped in the wrong kind of body, **Deirdre McCloskey** says, you may still want to consider changing your gender

Perhaps you've thought about changing gender. I don't mean you've thought about doing it yourself. Good Lord, no. We who have thought *that way* are only 1 in 500 of the born males, roughly the same of born females. Most people, even people who have complaints about how society makes women or men behave, settle their gender choices at about the age of two. Probably you have thought about the matter merely in the sense of catching half of the sweet movie *Transamerica* on cable TV, or watching for a few minutes one of the gender-crossing shows that Oprah does with her girl-friendly grace every year or so. Probably your thinking hasn't gone much beyond "Gosh; strange."

One book that you can use to think about gender crossing is Kate Bornstein's classic, **Gender Outlaw: On Men,**

**Women and the Rest of Us** (Routledge, 1994), a mixture of memoir and cultural critique, which also has a play embedded inside, *Hidden: A Gender*. Bornstein, who after being girly for a while has finally come to rest comfortably outside the dualism of gender, has an amusing follow-on, *My Own Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You or Something Else Entirely* (Routledge, 1998). She writes most entertainingly, but the message of gender freedom is dead serious. Another beautifully writing and edgy Kate, Katherine Cummings, wrote in 1993 **Katherine's Diary: The Story of a Transsexual** (Reed Books), a frank, tough-minded, but loving memoir of an Australian naval officer and librarian who began, as some do, as a cross-dresser and father, and needed, as very few do, to go further.

And if you are a caregiver of any sort – a teacher or a nurse or a social worker – I recommend Randi Ettner's **Gender Loving Care: A Guide to Counselling Gender-Variant Clients** (Norton, 1999). Ettner, a clinical and forensic psychologist in Evanston, Ill., has treated hundreds of gender crossers, and knows what



**Kevin Zegers, left, and Felicity Huffman in a scene from *Transamerica*, in which Huffman plays a man preparing for sex-change surgery.** JESSICA MIGLIO/THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY/AP

she's talking about. That's not something one could say, for example, about the authors of the "gender dysphoria" (Greek for "gender discomfort") section in the standard *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which your psychiatrist will reach for, should you get a notion of changing.

The story you'll learn from these good books is *not*, as people always think, that a MtF ("male to female": see, you're learning already) is "a woman trapped in a man's body."

What you'll learn instead is freedom. That's all. You were once a child. Without knowing exactly what it was like to be an adult, you knew you wanted to be one, and freely became one. It wouldn't make much sense to say you were "an adult trapped in a child's body." Though some kids are a bit like that. You were once a first-year university student. With grit and free choice, you've now become a businesswoman. You weren't a businesswoman in a first-year's body. You were a free Canadian citizen.

A guy wants to go to Venice on holiday. Feel free. That's similar to cross-dressing, like what my friend Michael Gil-

bert, a brilliant professor of philosophy at York University, does from time to time, quite openly (Michael and I don't like closets). But one in 500 men, say, wants to go to Venice ... and become Venetian. That's like MtF gender crossing. No one would say the new Venetian was trapped in an Upper Canadian body. He chooses, freely.

But hold on. Suppose you don't want to *think* about gender crossing, or to *understand* it to the extent that any free choice is "understandable." Suppose instead you want to reinforce the prejudices about gays, women, bisexuals, drag queens and gender crossers you acquired in the locker room at the age of 16.

In that case, do not read these books. Really, don't bother. They will just annoy and confuse you. Go and read instead Michael Bailey's *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender Bending and Transsexualism* (Joseph Henry Press). Bailey says, for example, that most gay men lisp. And that young gender crossers become prostitutes. And that women are hardly sexual at all. Hey, cool.

Bailey's book has a Toronto connection. He gets his theo-

ries – his own scientific contribution was to cruise the drag bars of Chicago for a sample of six Hispanic drag queens – from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health over on College Street. The Centre harbours a tiny group of psychiatrists and psychologists who are against people choosing to become what they want. They claim, against most psychologists who have thought seriously about gender crossing, such as Ettner, and against the experience of gender crossers like Bornstein and Cummings and me, that gender crossing is about sex, sex, sex. Men do it for pleasure. (Lord knows what FtMs do.) They're like pedophiles. They should be stopped. At the Centre, we have vays.

A couple of months ago, your own columnist Margaret Wente looked at Bailey's book, and found it good. "In other ways [gender crossers] aren't womanly at all," wrote Wente out of a close study of Bailey and locker rooms, apparently. For example, "they aren't interested in babies and children." Lipping, sex, sex, sex. Simple. So let's see. Born women who aren't interested in babies and children are less womanly than I, who was a man until the age of 53 – since I am in fact extremely interested.

So? Why should you read Bornstein and Ettner and Cummings, but take a pass on Bailey? Two reasons. Bailey's book is drag science, not real. And locker-room sexology is dangerous. The sex, sex, sex theory of the locker room and Bailey and Ms. Wente can lead to the deaths of queers.

And it does a lot of lesser damage. My son, for example, thinking my free choice was about sex, sex, sex, won't let me see the babies in whom – in my vulnerable, womanly way – I am most interested: my two grandchildren. Lovely. » Deirdre McCloskey teaches economics, history, English and communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has written a dozen books, among them *Crossing: A Memoir*, a 1999 *New York Times* Notable Book. Her website is [deirdremccloskey.org](http://deirdremccloskey.org).

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