

T R A N S G E N D E R
T A P E S T R Y

WINTER
2000

ISSUE #92
\$12.00

BE ALL 2000 • The Spiritual
Side of Gender Journeying •
Dealing with Deuteronomy •
Out and Proud • Poetry

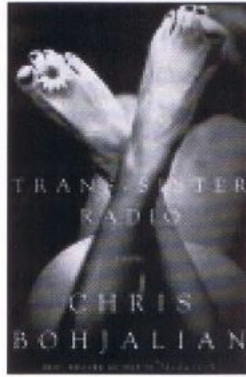


assumes that, since I appear unremarkably male when clothed, I must be a male crossdresser not “en femme,” a nontrans gay male ally, or a nontrans “transfan”? To community members who call me at 5 a.m. with personal woes or their latest, greatest idea for a community project? To FTMs who tell me I must be suffering from internalized transphobia because I don’t want to flirt with them or have sex with them? To transpeople who insist on calling me a “transman” after I have told them several times I don’t think of myself as any kind of a man, transman included? How should I handle the mixture of socializing, disclosure of personal information, flirtation, and work that often takes place in community organization meetings, so different from the professional environment to which I am accustomed? I’m sure the rest of you can think of many examples of your own of awkward situations with other transpeople.

Although I enjoyed reading this book and amuse friends with quotes from it, I’m uncomfortable with the impression it left me that Campbell believes etiquette outweighs all other values, political and ethical. His answer to a question about outing, for example, is that it is never appropriate to out someone because this would be “an invasion of that person’s fundamental right to privacy and self-determination” (p. 64). While this may be justified as a matter of etiquette, this answer ignores lengthy lesbian, gay, and bisexual community discussions about ethical and political values that can, in some situations, conflict with the values that prohibit outing. Similarly troublesome, I believe in Campbell’s assertion that, as a matter of etiquette, in mixed contexts mainstream manners should hold sway; political values may, in some situations, conflict with those of etiquette, and require discussion.

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RANS-SISTER RADIO



CHRIS
BOHJALIAN.
Harmony
Books, 2000.
\$24.00
ISBN
0609604074

Review by
Dallas Denny

Popular author Chris Bohjalian’s mainstream novel *Trans-sister Radio* has been drawing good press, but I have rather a problem with it.

SPOILER WARNING! If you don’t want to know the plot, skip to the next paragraph! The story line: Dana Stevens, a male-to-female transsexual in transition and a professor at a small college in rural Vermont, has a live-in affair with one of his students, Allison Banks, a sixth-grade teacher in the small town of Bartlett. When Dana begins to crosslive, a public outcry threatens Allison’s teaching job. Will Banks, Allison’s ex-husband and for years the director of Vermont Public Radio, has a skeptical dislike of Dana, but runs a two-day program on transsexualism which is picked up by National Public Radio, with Allison and Will’s daughter Carla moderating. Eventually, under pressure from the community, Dana and Allison break up, and by book’s end Dana and Will have become an item. **END SPOILER WARNING.**

The story is told in first person, alternating between Allison, Dana, Carla, and Will, interspersed with the supposed National Public Radio coverage, replete with the names of real NPR reporters and announcers. Curiously, although NPR and its employees are named, as are transgender personalities like Christine Jorgensen and Jan Morris, for some reason IFGE is disguised with the name International Association for Gender Diversity.

Bohjalian’s treatment of the transsexual issue, which might be considered sensitive and cutting edge by some, reads like a press release jointly authored by Drs. Shiela Kirk and

Stanley Biber—who were, in fact, two of his sources. Dana, within months, transforms from a fairly run-of-the-mill male professor type to a stunning and passable woman who is better at being a woman than natal females like Allison and Carla. Within months, in defiance of the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care, Dana has SRS. Her friends, her lover, and her lover’s family stand by her; her troubles, what few they are, are caused by an ignorant and intolerant populace.

Perhaps part of my problem stems from a dislike for Dana, who knowingly enters into a relationship with Allison, abusing not only the student-teacher relationship, but deliberately and cruelly not telling Allison of her impending transition. The latter would be understandable if Dana were as confused and frightened as most of us are at some time in our transgender careers, but Dana is knowledgeable and well-connected and at peace with who s/he is. Under those circumstances, withholding such vital evidence is, while common enough, reprehensible. I would have liked it better if this lack of character had shown itself in other ways, but instead Bohjalian paints Dana as the ever-noble and constantly misunderstood transsexual.

I was especially irritated by repeated references to Dana being a woman who happened to have a man’s body, for to me Dana’s behavior seemed to me unremarkably male and sexist even after transition. Bohjalian’s portrayal of Dana as a sort of superwoman, better than nontranssexual women without halfway trying, raised my feminist hackles. I was also put off by the author’s deliberate distancing of Dana from “Times Square transsexuals,” keeping her comfortably middle-class while giving her the sort of sexuality street trannies are famous for—for Bohjalian paints Dana as alluring, far more than mere mortals; after all, s/he wins the woman; later on, she even wins the ex-husband who had initially disliked her. Certainly transsexuals, even middle-aged ones, can be and should not be ashamed of being powerfully sexual, but Bohjalian takes the easy route by

making the transsexual an object of sexual desire, despite this one being middle-aged and remarkably unfeminine while in the male role. Somehow Dana magically transforms within months from a horny professor into a passable, alluring, and sexually magnetic woman, irresistible to both men and women. Not that it doesn't actually happen at times, but I don't buy it here.

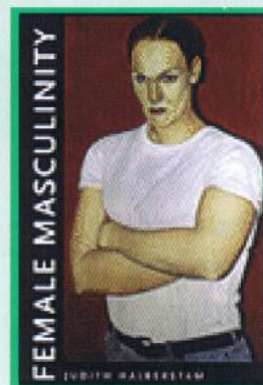
My major beef with *Trans-Sister Radio* is that the characters and plot are shallow, as if stamped out by a transgender community cookie cutter. It's as if Bohjalian read intently the community's literature and attempted to reproduce it faithfully in fiction. Consider this passage, replete with transgender clichés, in which Dana comes out to Allison:

Look, I'm a woman; a woman who's been saddled since birth with the body of a man. But in my mind, it's a fact: I'm female. Just like you. Well, not exactly like you, because you're straight and I'm gay. At least you've been straight until now. But my hope and my prayer is that none of that matters anymore, because in a couple of months I'm finally going to take care of it. The penis. I'm finally going to have the surgery that will make me as much of a woman on the outside as I am on the inside. And I know this is a huge stretch for you, but I'm hoping with all my heart you'll still love me. After all, I'll still be me. Dana. I'll be the exact same person I've always been, except I'll be dressing the way I'm supposed to, and I won't have to endure public bathrooms with urinals. — p. 67

To the unenlightened, *Trans-Sister Radio* will be a good read. I found the characters cloying, the NPR thread irrelevant and distracting, and Dana's willful mistreatment of Allison unforgivable. The eventual relationship with Will made the book, to me, no different than any other piece of masturbatory autogynephilic fiction.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH "JACK" HALBERSTAM, AUTHOR OF FEMALE MASCULINITIES

by Darryl B. Hill



Judith Halberstam is author of *Female Masculinities*, a book about women who define themselves by their masculinity. She is Associate Professor in the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego. She had previously published several articles on female masculinity, but this is her first book on the topic.

Judith and I met when she came to the college where I teach to give a lecture on the topic "Female Masculinities." In the morning she gave a guest lecture to my class (her first lecture to a psychology class!). We had lunch, and then we met later in the afternoon in an old 19th century mansion on campus where she was staying. We sat in what would have been the receiving room and talked about her personal motivations for writing the book, reactions to the book, male femininity, her next project, and the future of transgender scholarship.

DARRYL HILL: Why did you choose to study female masculinity?

JUDITH HALBERSTAM: I make it clear in the book from the outset that I am masculine. I also maintain female embodiment. I don't particularly identify as a woman, but I also don't identify as a man. The book is a way of justifying my sense of myself as masculine. You know, trying to get people to recognize me as masculine without presuming that I'm on my way to manhood or that I'm just a woman with a boyish look. The book suggests that there are more complicated gender identities between "man" and "woman" along the way, and I wanted to explore some of them.

DH: Have you always identified as masculine?

JH: Yes. I was basically read as a boy for probably the first 14 years of my life. I was constantly being coded as a boy. So, I think that one could say, after that kind of experience in childhood, that one has been "boyed." And having been recognized as a boy, it's very hard to not make that part of one's self-recognition.

DH: That personal commitment to the topic comes through fairly strongly in your book.

JH: Well, it's pretty important because if people don't know why you're writing about it, the criticism takes on a really different tenor. For example, in the chapter where I talk about female-to-male transsexuals, I mention a debate that occurred on an essay I had written about female-to-male transsexuals. And the assumption was that I was a feminine-identified feminist writing this piece. Once people realized that I was not only queer, but that I identified as butch, and a stone butch at that, the conversation shifted completely. So, when you reveal your stakes in the matter, people make less presumptions about you and then they have to read more carefully.

DH: So when you started doing research for the book, what surprised you most about the topic?

JH: I guess one of the surprises was the way people thought that they already knew what female masculinity was. People would respond as if this is an