



Normal: Transsexual CEOs, Crossdressing Cops, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude

Amy Bloom , Sigrid Estrada (Photographer) , J.K. Lambert (Designed by) , Allison Saltzman (Designed by)

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Amy Bloom has won a devoted readership and wide critical acclaim for fiction of rare humor, insight, grace, and eloquence, and the same qualities distinguish **Normal**, a provocative, intimate journey into the lives of “people who reveal, or announce, that their gender is variegated rather than monochromatic”—female-to-male transsexuals, heterosexual crossdressers, and the intersexed.

We meet Lyle Monelle and his mother, Jessie, who recognized early on that her little girl was in fact a boy and used her life savings to help Lyle make the transition. On a Carnival cruise with a group of crossdressers and their spouses, we meet Peggy Rudd and her husband, “Melanie,” who devote themselves to the cause of “ordinary heterosexual men with an additional feminine dimension.” And we meet Hale Hawbecker, “a regular, middle-of-the-road, white-bread guy” with a wife, kids, and a medical condition, the standard treatment for which would have changed his life and his gender.

Casting light into the dusty corners of our assumptions about sex, gender and identity, Bloom reveals new facets to the ideas of happiness, personality and character, even as she brilliantly illuminates the very concept of “normal.”

Normal: Transsexual CEOs, Crossdressing Cops, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude Details

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From Reader Review Normal: Transsexual CEOs, Crossdressing Cops, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude for online ebook

Coffeboss says

For such an interesting topic (it's all in the title), I felt that the author was afraid of really delving deep to portray these people as three dimensional. She kept a little distance, and sometimes seemed a little judgmental.

Cheryl says

A short book, lots of information, lots to learn not just about the three "communities" investigated but also about people who consider those ppl unnatural or sick, but covered quickly, concisely.

Fortunately, progress has been made. We probably owe a lot of our more loving understandings to some of the people named here, for example Cheryl Chase. I'm queer myself, so nothing here really surprised me. But some things appalled me, for example the prevalence of the attitude among doctors that intersexed newborns need to be fixed immediately.

Chase is a strong woman. The wives of the male heterosexual cross-dressers are, in their way, strong women. Bloom herself is a strong woman, for admitting to her ignorance and prejudice, doing all this research, and readjusting her understandings.

(Read for a "Strong Women" challenge.)

Chinook says

"People who reveal, or announce, that their gender is variegated, rather than monochromatic or plainly colored in the current custom, have always presented difficulties. Not only is our society distressed by masculine women, feminine men, and the androgynous; even the big man who embroiders, or the wife and mother of three who has a black belt in tae kwon do, a buzz cut, and no makeup in her gym bag, stirs a frisson of discomfort... I sometimes think that our culture is like the Church in the days of Galileo. We will not see, and we will silence and mock, even banish and punish, those who say that what is, is."

"Normal" by Amy Bloom is subtitled "Transsexual CEOs, Crossdressing Cops, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude." I found it an interesting account of her interviews and experiences. The book didn't really change my beliefs regarding transsexuals or the intersex, however I hadn't really spent any time contemplating heterosexual crossdressers; I'm far more familiar with drag queens and kings. I have to say, by the end of the book, I wasn't feeling especially interested in making the acquaintance of most of the characters she describes: they all come across in her narrative as narcissistic, misogynistic, conservative Republicans. Not my kind of people. In her interviews with experts, there is a suggestion that the crossdressing is both a compulsion and sexual in nature; the groups that the men and their wives have formed instead stress that the men are expressing their feminine side. However, Bloom describes the wives as being very unhappy, going so far as to say that their husbands' crossdressing is painful for them. She reports one wife saying, "For twenty years he couldn't help with the dishes because he was watching football. Now he can't help because he's doing his

nails. Is that different?" I wonder what support and accommodation these men are giving their wives, considering their wives seem to be giving an extraordinary amount of both. If anyone has any suggestions, I'd be curious to read more about the subject and see if Bloom's findings are common.

"Not monsters, nor marvels, nor battering rams for gender theory, people born intersexed have given the rest of the world an opportunity to think more about the odd significance we give to gender, about the elusive nature of truth, about the understandable, sometimes dangerous human yearning for simplicity-and we might, in return, offer them medical care only when they need it, and a little common sense and civilized embrace when they don't."

Amy says

I found this informative but not encyclopedic, academic without being dry and all in all, very charming. As someone with an interest in intersex, transsexual and transgender issues but without any formal academic study on the subjects, I found this an approachable and personable approach to getting started on the subject.

Although Amy Bloom was already one of my favourite writers, I came to this book of case studies after reading *Middlesex*, the 2002 novel by Jeffrey Eugenides about Cal, an intersexed person with 5-alpha-reductase deficiency. It remains one of my favourite books (I've read it many times since that first time!) and I feel *Normal* helped to give me a greater insight to *Middlesex*.

If you're also interested in these subjects, this is a great place to start. Amy Bloom's writing is not at all intimidating while still managing to be insightful, helpful and well researched. It has no ultimate truth; but then, everyone makes their own truth, as I think this book clearly indicates. I would definitely recommend this book. Start here and then branch out.

Sarah Evan says

Like many of the comments note, this book isn't going to do much for you if you are already well versed/entrenched in the topic of gender queerness. However, not everyone is so lucky, and I picked this up knowing that Bloom is a good writer and that she is approaching the topic as many family members and co-workers are -- from a straight and "othered" prospective.

With that prospective, I think Bloom offers a great introduction to the topics of being transgender (one story of a trans male (FTM), one story of a straight male cross-dresser, and one story of an intersex individual. In all honesty, I did not finish the book before I gave it to my mother, because by mid-book it seemed it would serve my purpose of educating those who ask me too many questions. And it did!

Good Book for the novice and/or for those who want to lend and make nice with the non-queerly gendered ;)

Morgan says

Dated and transphobic with much more of a focus on anatomy than human beings. Very disappointing.

Andi says

Although written 15 years ago, I found it to be educational.

Leah says

Very insightful book. As I don't have much first-hand knowledge of this world, this book brought me closer to understanding the issues/fears/experiences of this community. I was left feeling a little confused about the crossdressing community - as it seems Bloom was as well. Would love to read an autobiography of someone in that community to help shed more light there.

DDog says

I had forgotten about this book. This was one of the books that helped me realize I was trans when I was sixteen. Looking back, it's not a *great* book from the perspective I have gained since then, but it was an important book for me to read at the time. If you are unfamiliar with or struggle with understanding the things trans men, male cross-dressers, or intersex people deal with, it's not the worst start.

Barbara Anderson says

Having read all of Amy Bloom's fiction, and counting her as one of my favourite writers, it was interesting to read these essays (about interviews she conducted), which explore the myriad definitions of gender. Most fascinating was the long discussion on heterosexual cross-dressers, a sub-group who bother almost everyone - "Gay people regard them with disdain or affectionate incomprehension, transsexuals regards them as men "settling" for cross-dressing because they don't have the courage to act on their transsexual longing, and straight men find them funny or sad, and some find them enraging". If you want to expand your knowledge of the variety and fluidity of the definition of gender and its sexual expression you'll find this an absorbing reading experience. It has all of Amy Bloom's literary style and verve.

Jenni says

I liked that Amy Bloom informed through the use of mainly personal stories and interviews. Bloom doesn't overwhelm the reader with facts or scientific jargon, but rather, makes incredibly complicated issues seem, well, "normal." Her style of writing was accessible and easy to read, yet interesting and intriguing. It helped that the book was manageable in size (around 130 pages) and she doesn't waste time belaboring points or reiterating main ideas. By far, what I enjoyed most is that Bloom made no sweeping generalizations that something is one way for all people. She gave examples from both sides of a situation and emphasized people not the labels.

Lisa says

"Isn't there anything you've wondered about and never understood?" Amy Bloom responded to her editor's question with this series of essays that explore the experiences of female to male transsexuals (FTMs), heterosexual male cross dressers, and people who are intersex.

If you pick up "Normal" already believing that FTMs are truly men, then you'll have the interesting experience of witnessing Bloom, who doesn't seem to have been very well acquainted with queer communities before writing this book, having to catch up to you, the reader. But in spite of Bloom's "stranger in a strange land" perspective--which makes "Normal" a fantastic entrypoint to the more esoteric areas of queerness for people who are interested but don't yet understand--"Normal" still has a thing or two to teach to even the queerest of the queer.

In her gutsily honest portrayals, Bloom isn't afraid to capture the full range of the characteristics she encounters in individual FTMs and transvestites, from bravery, openness and beauty, to sexism, denial and egotism. The final essay on people who are intersex is about half the length of the first two essays, and the landscape of intersex activism has shifted radically since "Normal"'s publication. Today, Cheryl Chase/Bo Laurent, who is featured prominently in Bloom's essay, seems to be widely regarded as the Benedict Arnold of the intersexed. In spite of that, the issues that Bloom explores--surgery or no surgery? normal or not normal?--have not changed.

In short, this is a lovely, brave & thought-provoking book that manages to "photograph" a small part of a huge mystery, leaving the reader with enough food for thought for a hundred interesting and important conversations.

Saturday's Child says

This was not as insightful as I had thought it would be.

Jackie says

I picked up this book from the library after finding out that a man I know enjoys crossdressing as a woman, hoping to find more information about the phenomenon. The book includes three sections, one on female-to-male transsexuals, one on heterosexual male crossdressers, and one on intersex people. I'd read a lot about the latter already, so Bloom's information and insights weren't so "ah-ha" for me. The transsexual section was of the most interest, although it focused more on the surgical details of how females are transformed into males than on the potential explanations (biological, social, cultural?) for transsexuality. The middle section on heterosexual crossdressers, the one which initially drew me to the book, turned out to be the most disappointing one, perhaps because this group was the one with which Bloom was least comfortable. Are all heterosexual male crossdressers conservative socially and politically? Do all of their wives simply put up with their crossdressing, because they are traditionally feminine and thus accepting and bearing the crosses of their lives? Are all the men hiding a sexual fetish for women's clothing behind the more socially acceptable explanation that they are just embracing their feminine side? If she had interviewed these men not in the context of cross-dressing get-togethers (conventions, cruise-ship vacations), but in their own homes, might she have seen a wider variety of motivations and personalities, and thus been able to present heterosexual crossdressers as sympathetically as she does transsexuals and the intersexed?

Hannah says

There were a lot of passages that had me ready to give this book up, but this was the one that finally did me in:

"So you're the writer. Well, I'd say you pass pretty well," Felicity tells me. I smile pleasantly, as if I am not offended, as if I didn't think he intended to offend me. "Well," he says heartily, and then clears his throat twice and stares at my silk pants. "You gals just get to crossdress all the time and no one says boo." He sounds furious that life is so easy for me and so hard for him...

...but because he is a minister, and even more because he is dressed as and representing someone named Felicity, he cannot be direct or angry; he has to try to convey a serene and gracious femininity regardless of his feelings and the oddness of the setting, which is as hard for him to do as it would be for me.

This was where I decided that I was tired of seeing the author convey her own biases against the community she was writing about. The man in this scene who says "You gals just get to crossdress all the time and no one says boo," *is* being direct (and, I would say, tactfully angry). There are no hidden womanly ways here, or attempts to sidestep an issue, or botched feminine graciousness. This is just a direct and frustrated individual, doing a bang up job of expressing his feelings.

Previous moments that had me questioning the book were all the times that Bloom enters a scene and plays a game of "spot the deviant." She is regularly scanning crowds, trying to pick out who is gay, who is trans, who is the cross dress.

Spoiler alert! They are un-spottable, Bloom, because as your title puts it for you, *they are normal*. Maybe later in the book, Bloom shows self-reflection in realizing how outdated it was of her to try and peg someone mannish as being trans; I don't know. All I know is that this book frustrated more than it enlightened me, and had me giving up 45% of the way through it.
