

INTRODUCTION

Jo Clifford

I grew up in a very conventional family in England in the 1950s. I had no way to understand myself, and my family had no way to understand me.

It is hard to imagine, now, just how cut off from the basic information it was possible to be before the Internet.

I would look in the mirror and not truly recognize the boy I saw. This made me so afraid. I knew I could tell no one. I could only do my best to ignore it.

I would so badly want to play with girls' toys and wear girls' clothes, and, because I had no sisters and was brought up in all-male environments, this was mostly impossible.

But sometimes I could wear girls' clothes and openly imagine myself as a girl. This was when I was acting girls' parts in the all-male school I was forced to attend.

These experiences filled me with great joy and the greatest terror. Changing gender seemed utterly impossible at that time; and the desire to do so felt like something disgusting.

I was so ashamed of myself that I truly felt that if anyone knew the truth about me I would die of shame.

It seemed at the time that all I could do was hide my female self away and hope that no one would notice her.

What made it all far, far worse was that there were no words to describe myself. Words like *transgendered* simply did not exist.

So I considered myself unspeakable.

Unspeakably bad. Unspeakably alone.

I left school at eighteen and worked as a volunteer in a psychiatric hospital. I met a psychiatrist there who lent me a book called *Childhood and Society*.

It was written by a psychoanalyst called Erik Erikson, who was exploring, among other things, the different ways different societies bring up their children.

I was reading the chapter on Native American cultures when I read to my amazement about how adolescent boys were encouraged to pay attention to their dreams because a dream could tell an adolescent entering adulthood who they truly were.

A boy might dream of the moon holding in one hand a bow and arrow, the symbols of manhood, and in another a burden strap, a symbol of womanhood.

The boy had to choose.

And if at the end of the dream he found himself holding the symbol of womanhood, he could go to the elders of the tribe, tell them of the dream, and renounce the identity of manhood.

He could wear women's clothes and perform women's tasks and be honored and respected for doing so.

Finding that information was such an important moment for me.

I so longed to be able to tell my parents, and my friends, that in some way I could understand my identity seemed to be female.

And I longed even more to be able to live openly as I felt myself to be.

And even though I also knew such a thing was utterly impossible in the place and time in which I found myself, the understanding that there had been places where this happened, and perhaps still did . . . this so profoundly helped me.

In fact, I think it saved my life.

Because I knew I was no longer alone.

Ever since then I have been passionately interested in trans and queer history, and it makes me so honored and happy to write this introduction to Ardel Haefele-Thomas's groundbreaking and profoundly important *Introduction to Transgender Studies*.

A book like this matters to everybody. The more I speak and perform as a trans artist, the clearer it becomes to me that everyone suffers from the painful and damaging belief that there are only two genders in the world.

In that way it is so helpful for everyone to be reminded that ever since human beings began to organize themselves into societies there have existed different genders and sexualities outside the heterosexual norm.

And it helps all of us who identify as queer or trans to understand that we are not alone in the world.

That we all have a history to which we can proudly belong.

Jo Clifford

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