

(The Gender Centre advise that this article may not be current and as such certain content, including but not limited to persons, contact details and dates may not apply. Where legal authority or medical related matters are cited, responsibility lies with the reader to obtain the most current relevant legal authority and/or medical publication.)

Book Review: Finding the Real Me

True Tales of Sex and Gender Diversity

Reviewed by Niko Lekay

Article appeared in Polare magazine: October 2003 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



Finding The Real Me: True Tales of Sex and Gender Diversity by Tracie O'Keefe & Katrina Fox.

Finding the Real Me: True Tales of Sex and Gender Diversity

by Tracie O'Keefe & Katrina Fox
Published by Jossey-Bass (2003)
I.S.B.N. -13 978 0787965472

What this book offers is stories that may be close to what you want to hear, but it also forces you to understand how richly varied people are.

I read this book for a reason, to help me understand, so I can help my friend and his/her family. To understand how older transwomen, playing the role of a male bastion of society, experience and manage their self-discovery and the presentation of their sex and gender. I raced through the book, jotting down the notes that rang bells.

The layout of the book is unstructured, reflecting the nature of diversity, so that stories of male-to-female, female-to-male, and androgyny are interspersed with stories of older and younger people, complete and incomplete transitions. Had the editors structured the book into sections, I would have read only what I wanted to, and would have missed the rest. What this book offers is stories that may be close to what you want to hear, but it also forces you to understand how richly varied people are.

A book like this one saves you from feeling that you are alone. But while there is comfort to be found in stories that resonate with your own experience, there is the additional possibility

of discovering what you did not know. The 'real desire that dare not speak its name' is where many of these stories begin. Rebecca writes "I struggled to understand myself because I did not have a language that adequately described me". The work of making sense out of language and ideas that contradict what we intuitively know is hard enough, but so much harder when fear, secrecy and isolation are added to perplexity.

It is difficult to imagine, to those for whom sex and gender are taken for granted, like the ground we stand on, just what it is like to not have that. Many of the people writing for this collection call it a curse, and they are jealous of 'normality'. Rebecca says she was envious of girls her own age over their dress and appearance. She resorted to secretly trying on some of her sister's clothes, with the result that she became fascinated by signifiers of difference. In most of these stories, this fascination is not tolerated, and so begins a roller coaster ride of denial. Trying on clothes, hairstyles, ways of walking, being in secret. Coming close to declarations, or to being discovered, and so a flight back to the script that 'normality' prescribes. It becomes a 'typical purging pattern' that lasts for years, damages relationships and builds layers of guilt. A pattern that fiendishly asserts itself at the worst of times. As Rikki says, "when my life and relationships were not going well my desire to cross-dress increased". To read so many voices saying the same thing might make it a bit easier to imagine and to understand.

In two or three of these stories I find sentences that marry perfectly. Christine Burns writes: "It wasn't the prospect of change that terrified me, but the consequences". Melanie McMullan puts it directly: "who will accept me as I am?"

Certainly the Internet is a godsend, as a way of finding acceptance, of developing self-understanding together with others, but it isn't enough. One of the nightmares is what will happen if abandonment of existing relations is not an option.

Jennifer explains that: "my relationships to significant others are an integral part of my 'authentic-self', but we [she and her long-term partner] have not found a model for maintaining these relationships while going through transition".

Those people who most need this book are those who are most uncertain, or their loved ones who are trying to understand. The stories of success, of looking back and measuring up the cost and saying it was worth it, are encouraging and give hope and confidence. But we also need to hear of doubt, of failures, and of the determination to keep trying to find a way that is responsive to our unique circumstances.

In a letter to *Polare* (June-July 2002) a person writes: "I became fully aware ... of the distress my wife was going through ... Before I slept that night, I realised I could not carry on. I felt I had more to lose than I had to gain ... was I transsexual, or just on a mid-life escape trip?" Jennifer shows how she is still finding herself now, that even as she writes she is still making mistakes.

So she writes that even recently, "it was easier to tell myself and my partner that I was a cross-dresser than to admit the possibility that my core gender identity is feminine". Perhaps as a consequence of this uncertainty, her partner tends to see her gender expression as a 'hobby' to be tolerated, to be kept in its place, but not encouraged.

There is much to learn from these stories - both for those engaged in finding themselves, their sex and gender, and for those close to them. Christine Burns puts it in a nutshell: "I had to learn to see the curse as a gift, and so I've set out to teach people what I see".

This is not a position based upon ideals, although it sounds like it. It is based, rather, on the gritty reality that to find the 'real me', one doesn't have to be socially suicidal, that one has the right to privacy, that one may choose the time, the place and the company for coming-out. And the last story impels us to return to the beginning as one realises this selection of life cases is an ongoing transition, a re-entrant rollercoaster pattern of dilemmas to solve.

Finding the Real Me does not attempt to present a series of stories showing methods of achieving 'success' in transition. There is no simple way to find the 'real me'. Some people found the 'real me' and went on from there. For others, it is never a matter of ridding the real-self, but of creating it.

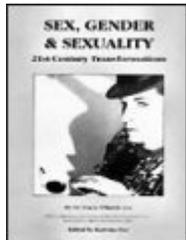
Dr. Tracie O'Keefe D.C.H., B.H.Sc., N.D.

From Tracie O'Keefe's website:  Tracie O'Keefe is a qualified and registered clinical hypnotherapist (A.S.O.C.H.A., psychotherapist, counsellor, mental health professional and trainer, working from a naturopathic perspective in Sydney, Australia. She trained at a post-graduate level with the National School of Hypnosis and Advanced Psychotherapy in London, U.K. U.K.C.P.-recognised school). Her degree and doctorate were earned at the American Institute of Hypnotherapy in the U.S.A. and issued in co-ordination with the Bureau for Private Post-Secondary and Vocational Education in California. She has been a family and couples therapist, a sex therapist and addictions therapist for many years and a qualified naturopath and medical herbalist, who trained in nutritional medicine with the Australian Institute of Applied Sciences. She holds a Bachelor of Health Sciences Degree in Complementary Medicine from Charles Sturt University. She is also an internationally published researcher, author and editor of the following books. [Read more about Dr. Tracie O'Keefe at her website](#) 



Trans-X-U-All: The Naked Difference
Author: Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox Publisher: Extraordinary People Press (1997)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-0952948209.

From Google Books:  This fresh and concise work takes an exciting look at the world of transsexuals. It explains the whole gender reassignment process from start to finish and includes deeply moving stories written by transsexuals themselves, their lovers, families and friends. Scientific, factual, informative, it provides, in accessible language, a comprehensive guide to the world of transsexuality.



Sex, Gender & Sexuality: 21st Century Transformations
Author: Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox
Publisher: Extraordinary People Press (1999)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0952948223

From Google Books:  This book dispels much of the mysticism around physical sex, gender constructs, and the diversity of sexuality. As well as considering gay, lesbian, transsexual and transgendered identities, it also looks at the intersex groups, such as hermaphrodites, and people who identify as androgynous or as being without sex or gender.

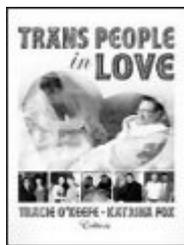


Finding the Real Me: True Tales of Sex and Gender Diversity
Author: Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox
Publisher: Jossey-Bass (2003)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-0787965471

From Google Books:  *Finding the Real Me* is an extraordinary collection of real-life stories told by a wide-range of sex and gender diverse people. These healing tales of struggle and transformation reveal just how creative, resourceful, and adventurous the individuals in this community can be and also helps to bridge the gap between ignorance and understanding. As each incredible story unfolds we become part of the author's journey to self-acceptance and join the celebration of their new life. Page by page, we laugh, cry, and learn to appreciate these wonderful courageous people and the road they walked to be their true-selves. *Finding the Real Me* is a landmark book that encourages us to embrace diversity, to never fear our differences, and to remain always in awe of our amazing possibilities.

Trans People in Love
Author: Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox
Publisher: Routledge (2008)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0789035721

From Google Books:  *Trans People in Love* provides a forum for the experience of being in love and in relationships with significant others for members of the trans community. This honest and



respectful volume tells clinicians, scholars, and trans people themselves of the beauty and complexity that trans identity brings to a romantic relationship, what skills and mindsets are needed to forge positive relationships, and demonstrates the reality that trans people in all stages of transition can create stable and loving relationships that are both physically and emotionally fulfilling.

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc. which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.