

# Do Clothes Make The Wo(Man)?

**TRANSFORMATIONS: Crossdressers and Those Who Love Them** by Mariette Pathy Allen (Dutton) \$24.95.

**MARGARET McCARTHY**

"It was as if I were seeing into someone's soul, unburdened by masculinity or femininity, as if in covering her male anatomy with a beautiful dress, her full humanity was present," says Mariette Pathy Allen in *Transformations*, a book not only about sexual identity and the mystery at its heart, but about the human spirit. Allen's unusual book provides a poignant, moving interplay between her stunning photographs and the self-portraits of dozens of crossdressers.

Three to 5 percent of the adult male population of the United States feels the need, at least occasionally, to wear women's clothing. The majority of these men are heterosexual and are husbands, fathers and grandfathers. They work as lawyers and bankers, factory workers and mechanics, art-

ists and musicians. They are inventors, obstetricians, computer operators and financial analysts. In Allen's book one is a former Green Beret, one a captain in the Royal British Navy. They are from all racial, ethnic and religious groups. What unites them is the need to escape the tyranny of the male role.

For many, this tyranny starts early on, with the teases and beatings boys are often subject to, and the pressure to hide their tears, along with all feelings and emotions. Says Chrysis: "I just wanted to escape my dad's beatings. I noticed many times my sister rarely got spanked." Merissa: "I realized that little girls are treated better than little boys." And Davida: "...women, they can just break down and cry in front of anybody and it's okay. Men really can't do that without being labeled weak. When I'm dressed as Davida...I can express my emotions freely." Chrysis's poignant comment sums up: "I've never been tough. I've tried to act tough."

For some, the hardening



"DADDY CHRYSIS" AND NICOLE

Mariette Pathy Allen

process males are brutalized by is compounded by a dysfunctional family—a drunk or absent father, relatives who dress them as girls, or a mother who makes it clear she wanted a daughter instead. Crossdressing becomes an escape from the pain of traditional sex roles and the violence they inflict.

The book fascinates by presenting a variety of voices from the gender community and their different approaches to and perceptions of crossdressing. For some, it's not important to pass in public as a woman; for others, it is. For some, the act of dressing is heavily erotic; for others, not. In escaping the confines of strict masculinity, some adopt a female persona that is strictly traditional, while others may express their female side through involvement in the sadism and masochism or bondage and discipline scenes. And some, like Ariadne, are androgynes—"people who take elements of conventional masculinity and femininity and blend them in a way that is unique to their personal expression."

How do their wives, lovers and families feel about this? In some cases it's "no big deal" or, merely, "I get confused doing the laundry." Says Kaye, Elayne's wife: "...I see it enables him to get into a different space...I don't think crossdressers should be seen any differently from artists or people who start fads." Eve's wife "saw the person behind the pretty dress." Allison's wife, Patsy, signaled acceptance with a Christmas stocking full of feminine goodies.

For some, being married to a crossdresser is preferable. Says Kary: "I think if I were to die tomorrow, Laura would seek out another crossdresser. She feels we're more sensitive caring, openminded, and nonjudgmental." For others, coming to terms with their partner's crossdressing is a hard and painful process. "I grieved...I tried to commit suicide...I was really threatened, and never knew if he were seeing himself as a man or a woman..." says Lois, Penny's wife. She joined a wives' support group and is reunited with her husband.

In other cases, divorce

results when a wife can't accept a husband's crossdressing, sometimes after years of it being kept a secret. The same men may remarry when they find a partner who can accept it. The decision to tell children and other close relatives is also risky, although the family can be a source of support. Nancy, Penny's daughter, says: "He's always been my daddy. A daddy is a daddy." Hugh, Gwen's brother, says: "I think it's great! I think Gwen is, in a way, representative of the godhead. She represents the unification of opposites." In fact, reactions of their loved ones are as varied as the crossdressers themselves.

The book's black-and-white photographs have a photojournalistic quality that make us privy to the crossdresser's daily life and its rituals. We see Valerie with her children at the playground, looking like any well-dressed suburban mom. We see the process by which Bob becomes Malinda. Many of the color

his female creation as his better, or simply more human, half. "The femme role is not talking in a singsong voice, or about make-up. It is a woman's sense of caring; it is higher goals," says Elizabeth Anne, Virginia Prince, publisher of the first magazine for crossdressers, puts it this way: "For most crossdressers, the feminine clothing simply gets them out of jail, so they can, for a limited time, be the kind of person they cannot be the rest of the time. Ideal liberation, for all people, is not to become men and women, respectively, but to achieve the right to express and enjoy the variety of ways people can approach life without having to deal with the label of masculine or feminine."

Would crossdressers need to dress as women if men were allowed to express the full range of their human emotions? Perhaps this question can't be answered, since our culture is so far away from that ideal. Nevertheless,



GWEN WITH MOTHER, SHIRLEY

Mariette Pathy Allen

photographs, by contrast, have a more formal quality. Some are posed portraits, such as Felicity, with her portrait as a five-year-old behind her, and Dorothy, with purple nails and matching purse.

According to early Greek myth, humans were originally androgynous; the gods jealously split this first human into two halves. The crossdresser often thinks of

*Transformations* challenges us to rethink our definitions of masculinity and femininity and to reconsider our ideas about sexual identity and its place in the human spirit.

Margaret McCarthy is a photographer and poet who has exhibited widely and been published in a variety of literary magazines and small press publications.

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