

Sexual Identity: a balanced view

Transvestites and Transsexuals: Mixed Views, by Deborah Heller Feinbloom. Delacorte Press / Seymour Lawrence, 1976; 303 pp. (hard-bound), \$12.50.

A Review by J.D. Sittler

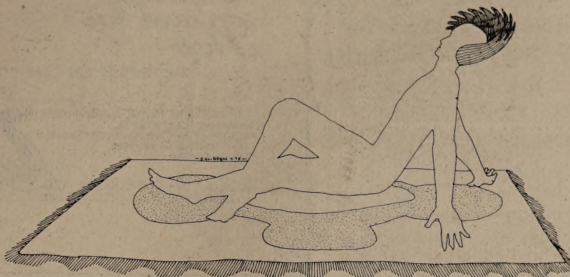
For openers, I'll tell you this book is NOT about GAYS! And since this review is being published in a gay newspaper read predominantly by gay readers, you may wonder why it's being reviewed at all. Well, anyway, it's a nifty book! But I suppose that's not a good enough reason. So how about this?: "Transvestites, transsexuals and homosexuals are lumped together as social deviants in our culture; and are put down for their deviation from what's 'normal.'" Feinbloom continually differentiates among these three groups; and she does so non-judgmentally, as one would expect coming from a consummate social scientist and, as it happens, a skilled writer.

Still not won over? How about this?: "Some transvestites are gay, but most aren't." Of course, this book is about those who aren't. OK, then, how about this?: "Some gays feel transvestites are fence-sitters who haven't made the BIG DECISION to 'go gay all the way.'" Well let me tell you, Cookie, they ain't. And that's a distinction Feinbloom clearly draws throughout this sensitive chronicle of her excursions as a sociologist into the world of heterosexual transvestites and the demimonde of transsexuals, most

of whom, interestingly, also regard themselves as heterosexuals, albeit in the wrong bodies.

Want another reason?: Some closety, up-tight, awkwardly-coming-out homosexuals see sex-reassignment surgery a la the transsexual as a way to help them adjust to their new sexual orientation. And that's, in medical parlance, contra-indicated; in other words, a bad scene. So some of you

reading about those who are perhaps more stigmatized than themselves and with whom they are often confused. It's like walking around in someone else's skin, feeling their feelings and thinking their thoughts. The immediacy and compelling emotion of the cross-dressers' dilemma comes through the many letters and comments from them which Feinbloom has incorporated into her text. As she



confused types should read this book to understand what you *don't* need.

So if you're still not convinced, I'll let Feinbloom speak for herself: "To the extent that we continue to label and isolate the 'deviant' in order only to reinforce our own standards of 'normal,' we are locked into the social order. It is when we can openly explore the meaning of the 'deviance' and challenge the label that we begin to be able to shape our world creatively to respond to our needs." Gays, who ought to have a gut-level appreciation of what it means to be social outcasts, can gain a deeper understanding of the roots of their own oppression through

points out, sexual status and color-caste status are two forms of rank in our society from which the only approved means of escape is death. No upward mobility allowed. And sex-inappropriate behavior is a serious infraction of the social code. That's something any "deviant" gay person can relate to.

The external manifestation of the transvestite's and transsexual's deviance is in the way they dress publicly and privately, occasionally and constantly: men dressed as women and women as men. By an examination of this deviation from approved patterns of dressing and comportment in our society, Feinbloom clearly describes the significance of dressing as a form of personal expression which is culturally determined.

As you might expect, a sexist culture breeds sexist standards for dressing. Women, who are of lower social status, can dress more freely as men (aspire to the elect) than can men dress as women (abdicate higher rank). In a parlor experiment, Feinbloom asked a group of "normal" people to rank six people in order of deviance: a man and woman nude, each half-dressed as the other, and each fully-dressed as the other. All were on public "display." Though there was some equivocation for the others, it was unanimous that the half-dressed man (posing but not passing as a woman) was most deviant, and the half-dressed woman was least deviant. The man was perceived as sick or hysterically funny, the woman as sexy and seductive.

In dress and behavior, there were some interesting differences between transvestites (TVs) and transsexuals: "The definition of a 'woman' or a 'man,' transsexual style, is far less stereotyped than in the transvestite world." "At dances, the queens [gay TVs] are in high-style regalia; the transvestite [straight TV] looks more as though he was dressed for a PTA formal." At the risk of stereotyping, the male transsexual is generally a "natural" woman in appearance and behavior, a straight TV "sedate," and a gay TV "flamboyant." The gay TV dresses and acts "flamboyantly" to sexually attract men, and the straight TV "sedately" to express his feminine nature. The transsexual is "naturally" expressing a gender identity (self-concept) which happens to conflict with a gender role (social perception) — the right sex in the wrong body.

This calls attention to the difference between maleness and femaleness that is another focus of the book. These ineffable qualities, which our society

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Identity



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ascribes to men (active, physical, dominant) and women (passive, sensual, submissive), are part of us all, in different proportions, regardless of sex or sexual orientation. The transsexual author Jan (nee James) Morris attempted to get a handle on these qualities from a very personal viewpoint (inside view) in his/her chronicle of life in the wrong-body-made-right, *Conundrum*. His male "rhythm" was very intense when as a fit young journalist he was climbing the slopes of Mount Everest. His female "bril-

liance" was very intense when as a child he sat under a piano or as an undergraduate sat under a tree in an Oxford quad. (Interesting symbolism!) Feinbloom, who, by the bye, is an authentic biological lady, takes a different approach: that of a perceptive observer and intelligent interpreter. She does not try to intellectualize away the dichotomy between society's concepts of "maleness" and "femaleness," but recognizes it on an emotional level, the same level on which the transsexual and transvestite are work-

ing. More so than Morris, Feinbloom emphasizes that the differentness of these sex-specific emotional qualities is in large part culturally conditioned, though she acknowledges that as yet undiscovered genetic, hormonal and other physiological factors may be significant, at least for transsexuals. Further, her book represents a challenge to us all to re-examine these concepts and their relevance for our own lives: "By defining himself or herself as living in the wrong body and

having inner feelings that are not congruent with the biologically assigned sex, the transsexual forces us to re-examine the standard definitions of male and female as well as the assumption that becoming a man or a woman is fairly uncomplicated." While Feinbloom writes with scientific acumen, you don't have to be a sociologist to understand her. She treats with lucidity and objectivity a complex, controversial and fascinating subject. Read this book. You might learn something about yourself.

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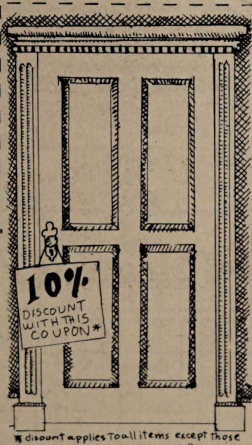
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