

Traps and the Transsexual Family

The Gender Trap

by Chris Johnson and Cathy Brown,
with Wendy Nelson
Proteus Books
New York
1982, 200 pp., \$14.95

Reviewed by Jade Ireland

Coming out stories seem to have an inherently radical element to them. There is great risk in exposing our innermost feelings; we face people's judgment, misunderstanding, and bigotry, placing a high price on our integrity. *The Gender Trap*, the newest in a genre of autobiographies by transsexuals, is the coming out story of Christopher Johnson and Cathy Brown, formerly Ann Johnson and Eugene Brown. The two meet, fall in love, have a child and then begin their carefully planned transitions to live as their chosen genders. *The Gender Trap* carefully de-sensationalizes a story that a couple of years ago was displayed in typically bizarre fashion by *The National Enquirer* and other such newspapers. The book, says ghostwriter Wendy Nelson in her introduction, is an attempt "...to set the record straight about transsexualism and in doing so create a better understanding amongst those of us fortunate to have been born in the correct body, as well as giving support and reassurance to those who have not." Perhaps anticipating criticisms that transsexuals are simply conforming to society's expectations, she comments, "Their predicament may not yet be fully understood by the doctors, but one thing seems clear: there is, and always will be, a dividing line between enlightened sexual convention and the transsexual instinct."

While insightful, these statements oversimplify ideas that are very complex. Phrases like "correct body" and "transsexual instinct" offer concepts of which most people have little understanding. These phrases suggest images that confine transsexuality to the limits of a sexist and role-oriented language. Transsexuality does not fit the definitions allowed by our society of male and female, even if some transsexuals accept common sex roles.

Cathy Brown and Chris Johnson begin exploring feminist aspects of transsexuality, but shy away from directly confronting these issues. While the authors say things that are clearly supportive to gayness, they choose never to discuss the homophobia in their own backgrounds. Cathy, who was not involved with women when living as Eugene, has discovered her bisexuality since living as a woman. Yet, when living in a male role, Eugene avoided relationships with men. Chris, when living as Ann before changing genders, displayed similar contradictions. Active in socialist and women's politics, Ann presents her feelings of not connecting with other women and of having no interest in lesbianism. The complexity of this issue is perplexing. As many gay men and lesbians explore their own homophobia, a product of growing up in a heterosexist society, it is inviting to dismiss Chris and Cathy's transsexual identifications as an avoidance



Jennifer Camper

of their homosexual feelings. Complicating the apparent simplicity of this argument is the fact that transsexuals of both sexes explore precisely these issues before and after their decisions to physically change their genders. That transsexual feelings are unique from gay and lesbian feelings is suggested by the authors, but not discussed in depth.

Clearly, *The Gender Trap* warrants feminist criticism and offers no comprehensive feminist analysis of transsexualism. It does not pretend to do so. It does present a more realistic and deeper view of transsexualism than any other current writing on the subject. It also may be the first autobiography offering the experiences of a female-to-male transsexual. Female transsexuals (women changing to live as men) number significantly, but are virtually ignored by every aspect of society, a fact begging further analysis in itself.

In the past there have been life stories by transsexuals such as Christine Jorgensen, Jan Morris and Nancy Hunt. These three autobiographies, written in the 1960's and 1970's, reflected a view of gender based almost solely on traditional sex roles. Jan Morris discusses the excitement of having men treat her as a lady. All three authors also present their transitions

as fairly simple. Nancy Hunt expounds on the interest straight men paid to her the first times she dressed as a woman. The process for most transsexuals is in reality a long, difficult one, including many personal risks. Chris Johnson and Cathy Brown make the difficulties clear, describing harassment on the street and their employment problems. They also go further than any of the previous authors in questioning their sex roles. If they don't satisfactorily identify the source of their feelings, it is not surprising since theories of gender development are inconclusive and based on sexist assumptions. The strength in *The Gender Trap* is the honesty, sometimes brutal, sometimes touching and reassuring.

The stories of Eugene Brown and Ann Johnson are told separately, chapter by chapter. Eugene, a working class Irish boy, and Ann, a middle class English girl, grow up in vastly different backgrounds. Their commonness is in the dissatisfaction with their lives, an incompleteness neither can define. When they meet as adults they intuitively sense each other's difference from other people and eventually confess to each other their desires to change their genders. This

Continued on Book Review page 7

Maudlin Melodrama and Other Embellishments

A Comfortable Corner

by Vincent Virga
Avon
New York, 1982
324 pp., \$3.50

Reviewed by Will James

Alcoholism is a disease so powerful that it seems to develop a life of its own, becoming the mocking master, not only of the alcoholic, but also of those who love him or her. It's fitting, then, that in Vincent Virga's *Comfortable Corner*, alcoholism is treated almost as a distinct character. In fact, in this overwritten story of an alcoholic poet, his novelist lover and their struggle to survive the disease with their relationship intact, it is by far the most interesting character.

Both men are brilliantly talented, financially successful and absolute knockouts to look at. Indeed, apart from the drinking they are practically perfect—except for their names, which are Christopher More and Terence Strange. As if that isn't bad enough, their nicknames are Christo and Toddy. Other characters are called things like Morgan Connelly, Andrew Desmond and Rudd Rooney. Names are not Virga's strong point.

Unfortunately, neither is dialogue. People are always saying things like: "I loved you before I knew what gifts your loving would pour over my parched life." Or: "The mess of it all, the lie-riddled mess of our sad, diseased lives..."

These flowery passages frequently occur in long stretches of back and forth exchange with nary a "he said" or "she said" to help you figure out who's talking. This wouldn't be a problem if the characters had strong personalities. Then you would know, but unfortunately, characterization isn't Virga's strong point, either.

There are two kinds of people in this book: the alcoholics and those struggling to deal with the alcoholics. Both groups are sensitive as all get out, but sensitivity alone does not make a personality, and rarely, if ever, do these people come to life. They are so awash with self-pity that, for a group of people caught in such tragic circumstances, I found it difficult to care very much about any of them. Mostly I wanted to slap them. It's a telling comment on this novel that Andrew Desmond, who is despised by everyone in the book because he is—horrors!—effeminate, emerges as the only likeable character.

These bland people do very little, and the things they do are mostly pointless and disconnected. Plot, it seems, is also not a Virga strong point. The main activity, depending on personality type, is either getting drunk or attending Al Anon meetings. And they cry. Someone is always crying in this book. They cry sober, they cry drunk. They cry alone, together, when writing, on the phone and at dinner. They even cry when they orgasm. Must be all that sensitivity. They also faint and throw up frequently.



Paul Vuipe

Accounting for Our Lives

Keeper of Accounts

by Irena Klepfisz
Persephone Press, Inc.
P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172
1982, 97 pp., \$5.95

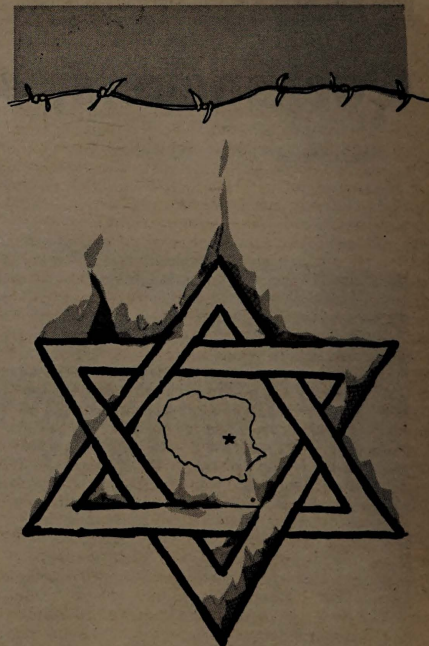
Reviewed by Malkah Barsey Feldman

Irena Klepfisz' new book of poetry contains a variety of poetic styles, including narrative prose poetry. Rooted in the political reality of her life, she captures moments of her experiences that transcend time and age. Her poetry is raw and blatant, yet sensitive and compelling. It is a journey through the stark and brutal realities of oppression.

"From the Monkey House and Other Cages" is the first sequence of poems. In the first person voice of a female monkey, we are taken into the cell of captivity (a zoo). Through Klepfisz' metaphoric use of monkeys, we are taken into the world of concentration camps. While themes of rape and extreme deprivation underlie the poems, survival and hope bring to light the will to escape the present and dream new possibilities. Wommin-bonding is captured in the poem as the monkey who is speaking speaks to us of her love for another in the cage:

- (1) . . . but morning
brought back the space . . .
her weakened
body my head against her
breast: my mouth empty.
- (2) yet she was all
my comfort: . . .
- (9) (from Monkey II)
when she died i mourned
a silent mourning.
- (9) . . . i would lie
down dream . . .

Klepfisz uses imagery that is alive and therefore capable of touching our deepest emotions. Through the use of monkeys we are reminded of the link between human beings and animals when both are controlled by brutal and savage men. This first sequence of poems touch both the depth and all-pervasive influence of fascist control.

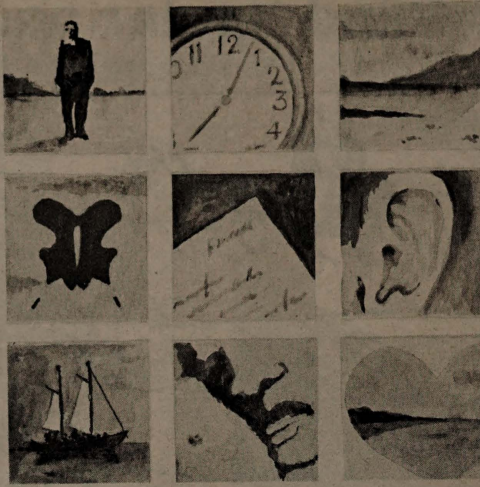


L. Severance

Section II of the book is entitled "Different Enclosures." In the Work Sonnet poems she uses poetic verse and narrative forms of prose poetry to take us in and then out of the external world of mundane work servicing patriarchy, and the internal longings for productivity that is meaningful to our lives. To emphasize the break between her two worlds, she uses ". . . and day breaks" in repetitive fashion. This is stinging reminder that we often go on surviving daily drudgery regardless of our longings.

In Section III, entitled "Urban Flowers," Klepfisz' poems speak to themes of growth within captivity.

Continued on Book Review page 8



Paul Brault/ette

Poetry Art Print Images

Ship Desert Boat Cargo

by John Robinson
The Printing Press
523 Clipper, San Francisco, CA 94114
1982, 41 pp., \$4.00

Reviewed by Garland Kyle

Historically, poetry is an art form, capturing images in print, painting a canvas of words, a rhythm of sound. Its essential nature is to provide a medium which illuminates a sketches the human condition and the environmental forces affecting our lives.

"Painting with language is putting nouns on the canvas," writes James Barrett in the forward to John Robinson's first collection of homosexual love poems entitled *Ship Desert Boat Cargo*. "dispensing with the descriptive prose of common speech," he continues. If nouns are the language and art of poetry, then Robinson has captured the essence of this ancient medium in his collection of twenty-seven love poems.

In composition, the verb expresses an act, a way of being or an actual occurrence, while the noun expresses the subject of speech, a person, place or thing. Through his usage of nouns, Robinson captures stunning images of the erotic and sensualness of contemporary homosexual love. He writes in the poem "Desert":

crossing time a flat area
of land
hands on yr
hands complete flat
ness in the desert
lips on his chest
is being the homosexual just
a case of renouncing
feminine love which you have
been offered
combined w/ the lack
of opposing force
the reduction of variables

Robinson examines the sociological, intuitive and geographical images so commonly referred to as the "homosexual sensibility." While his poems are succinct and minimalist in structure, they are representative of various avant-garde language stylists such as Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf, who taught the literary world that words and language are elastic and can be both abstract and illusory, without being frag-

mented and obscure. In the poem "Timing," Robinson writes:

he is a signpost
w/ no sense that he
keeps yr time nor that
he ages

His post-modernist view of the homosexual in the late twentieth century is provocative. It merges a sense of destiny and of urban sexuality with a vital attempt at waging war with time and the process of aging. Robinson's portraits illustrate the nuances of post-gay liberation culture, as seen through his own poignant vision of love and relationships, an endearing voice which is heartfelt and strikingly tonal. Words reverberate a message to the reader, questioning the intent of sexuality and love, the contradictions and battles waged for both political and personal liberation. As in the poem "Reversal":

show him you love him
a homosexual is a double
gender, accounting for the
strength, the anamnesis,
one gender in reverse
assumes a feminine
pose,
then trading,
the problem of anal capitalism
inability to barter

Robinson's poems are tightly composed. The words and images which flow through the pages of *Ship Desert Boat Cargo* are carefully constructed to give the reader full responsibility of interpreting his message. They are concise and yet not easily comprehensible. Like most poetry laced with metaphors, Robinson's prodding work must be read several times. The reader must attend his work with a careful eye for subtlety, in the absence of structure.

In "Ship," he aptly laments:

metaphor has more appeal
I want an idea of you
precise sad words
if you cannot answer questions
I will want more words
yr silence in reverse of my voice
going back for words

© 1982 Garland Kyle

Transsexual Family

Continued from Book Review page 2

happens simultaneous to their becoming lovers and beginning what they admit is an unusual relationship.

After the birth of their daughter Emma, they begin changing their sexes. Changing genders in this society is extremely difficult, and Chris and Cathy are simultaneously raising a child who they hope will know them in their chosen roles. The story does not end with the last pages of the book. This story presents real people, and there is no attempt to glorify their lives. When newspapers exposed the story to public scrutiny, Chris and Cathy lost their chance at blending into the world quietly. They have chosen to make the best of their situation. Having already been judged by countless strangers, they are responding with their view of themselves. They, with Wendy Nelson, have made the experience of their lives interest-

ing and accessible. They have also maintained dignity without defensiveness that is not only admirable but inspiring in its example to many kinds of people living through similar struggles.

The authors sum up in their last paragraph, "Nor can there be any straightforward conclusion, for once their ultimate goal is reached, there can be no guarantee that the remainder of their lives will be any improvement on the past. The only certainty is that Chris and Cathy, as man and woman together, and with Emma at their side, will face the world in the way they believe Nature intended. . . ."

The Gender Trap assumes that transsexuality is a separate issue from the roles we all play. This book represents a long-awaited step forward toward developing a clear awareness of a misunderstood segment of society.