

Shenher, Lorimer. 2019. This One Looks Like a Boy: My Gender Journey to Life as a Man. Vancouver: Greystone Books.

Reviewed by: Spencer Crisp

Lorimer Shenher's book "This One Looks Like a Boy: My Gender Journey to Life as a Man", is a memoir in which he depicts the chronological expedition of his struggles, triumphs, and significant life events cumulating with his transition from being a female to a transgender male. Born Lorraine Shenher, Lorimer showcases his transitional adventure utilizing humour and various flashbacks to place the reader alongside him in order to frame his gender struggle in a way which is relatable to the reader. In doing so, Shenher also draws on many important influences on his life including his friends and family, sports, religion, and his employment, among others. There are four main timeframes in his life that play a dramatic shift in his gender identity, such as his early childhood and youth years, his early adulthood, his more advanced adult life, and lastly, his current gender and sex identification. There are a multitude of themes that Shenher constantly returns to throughout his book, with a notable one being fear. Fear of people figuring out his secret, fear of being abandoned by those he loves if they find out, and fear of making the right or wrong decision occurs frequently throughout his life. Another constant theme throughout the memoir is Shenher's feelings of alienation and loneliness from his peers and the rest of society, a feeling he's known from the very early stages of his life.

Shenher opens with describing his earliest memory, noting an event while he was in kindergarten where he was presented the option of lining up in the boys or girls' line and chose

the boys. Despite being born a girl, Shenher had always envisioned himself as a male, explaining to his teacher “‘I’m supposed to be a boy...I don’t belong with the girls’” (p. 4). Even as young as he was, Shenher understood that his sense of self was intrinsically male. His inner anxiety regarding his birth sex is shown prevalently throughout his book. Lorimer describes a moment in his childhood where he had an accident while ice skating outside with his brother which knocked him unconscious, and as he begins to wake up he imagines that he is turning into a boy. His inner monologue proclaims, “*Please let me look like a boy now*, I begged whoever was responsible for this dream.” (p. 9). This is an extremely important aspect of Lorimer’s story because it begins to hint at the true desperation he faces as he begins to understand his gendered self being misaligned with his sex given at birth.

The repression of his gender desires and his doubt regarding himself are also reoccurring aspects of Lorimer’s gender struggle. He articulates his learning of Christine Jorgensen, one of the first people in the world to undergo gender reassignment surgery, by stating:

I lay there, a Catholic kid in mid-1970s Calgary, tears streaming down my face. *I can never do it. This will never happen for me.* I berated myself silently for opening this can of worms, for picking this scab, for allowing myself to hope – even for the briefest of moments – that my life could be set right. It felt like I’d opened a gift meant for someone else. I couldn’t figure out which hurt more: enduring the jolts of disappointment after glimpses of happiness or burying my dream of living the life I wanted (p. 33).

Lorimer continues to show this alienation from himself and from other people as he grows from a child into his teen and early adulthood years, using alcohol as a means of escaping away from his displeasure with his gender and lessening his fear of people discovering what he considers his true self. He notes “Drinking eased my social anxiety. When I drank, I didn’t worry about not

fitting into my gender, or my skin. I was popular, and I enjoyed it, but I lived in constant fear of someone learning the truth about me” (p. 55).

There is an overall shift in the book after Lorimer begins to reveal his gender identity with others. While still incredibly fearful of the negative reactions he might receive, Shenher begins to open up to a select few individuals he trusts. The tension is evident when he describes how he feels to Marcus, the man he was seeing at the time by admitting “...I feared that at any moment he would stand up, get dressed, and walk out the door” (p. 121). Marcus seems to understand, but later cuts contact with Lorimer once he returns back to the United States. Lorimer’s fears of not having people accept how he feels come to life when he initially reveals the news to his parents. Both his mom and dad do not understand or accept what he has to say, and as Lorimer describes “My hopes sunk as I saw the angry and confused expressions on their faces” (p. 142). After working up the courage to be open and honest with his parents, he is shunned and told that his feelings are wrong. This situation is unfortunately common for many individuals within the LGBTQ+ community but is also later juxtaposed by his parents eventually coming around to support his (at the time) same-sex marriage.

As Shenher’s book comes to a close he eventually decides to undergo gender reassignment surgery and transition to a male. Despite having a loving family Shenher still feels the disconnect and alienation towards his body and feels as if he does not properly belong in society. The unconditional acceptance he receives from with partner, Jennifer, and their children is enough to ensure he pursues the transition fully. This can be seen as Lorimer’s climax of the story, where

he has to face his fears completely and outwardly accept his new gender identity. Throughout the book he acknowledges that as soon as he is bound for good things, he abandons his plans in order to protect himself, but in this instance, he fully commits himself in order to be able to fully follow happiness in his life.

Overall, “This One Looks Like a Boy” was an extremely enjoyable and informative book. Shenher’s mixture of humour and deep, personal struggles created an engaging and personable feeling. His personal quirks and blend of jokes and darker themes made this book incredibly relatable, even though I have never faced such struggles with my gender. Due to the nature of this book being a personal memoir, I was not able to find any shortcomings of this work since it is simply his own life story, rather than a scholarly or historic piece of writing. I would consider the academic audiences who would be interested in this book would be those in the fields of sociology, anthropology, as well as women’s and gender studies.

Shenher addresses both his intentions of the book as well as his audience in the introduction, asserting that this book is meant for all to enjoy. He states that this is simply his experiences as a transgender man, and that his story is not a universality to represent all transgender individuals.

Perhaps you’ve picked this up because you read my last book. You might be the parent of a child questioning their gender and you’re looking for guidance. You could be an old fossil like me, wondering if it’s too late in the game to find some happiness. Or you might think this gender transition stuff is just so much garbage, the product of an over-indulgent age....And if you’re that kid reading these words underneath the covers with a flashlight, terrified of what you think you might be, this is for you (p. 1).

His intention for the book was to entertain, enlighten, encourage, and inspire those who may have similar struggles with who they see themselves, and also act as a broader form of dialogue for other non-transgender individuals.