

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

Reviewed by: Rachelle Eldridge, MacEwan University

Lorimer Shenher's book, "This One Looks Like a Boy: My Gender Journey to Life as a Man", is his memoirⁱ. Shenher writes in a way that exposes the intrinsic dilemmas he faced "as a boy going through life as a girl" (p. 35)ⁱⁱ. There is an openness and vulnerability that comes with the memories and moments shared. He neatly structured the chapters in chronological order and gently guides the reader from Lori's early childhood into Lorimer's adulthoodⁱⁱⁱ. Shenher is a published writer and his skill shines through in this book. Even as a child in kindergarten Lori's identity forced her to face big issues. Being closeted for the first portion of his life, Shenher was burdened with miscalculations and misunderstandings. These miscalculations lead to many internal dilemmas during Shenher's development. Shenher and his mother's relationship was complicated however, Shenher thought the world of his father.

The author Shenher is a skilled writer. Lori worked in the media with the Calgary Herald, the Pincher Creek Echo, and the Morinville Gazette. In addition to having written for the newspaper and dailies, Shenher had published another book titled "That Lonely Section of Hell: The Botched Investigation of a Serial Killer Who Almost Got Away" based on his involvement with the Robert Pickton case (p. 197). In 2016, that book was nominated for six national awards (p. 269). "This One Looks Like a Boy: My Gender Journey to Life as a Man", is about Shenher's life

experiences; Shenher is the expert in this field.

Raised during the late 1960s to the early 1980s Lori had many internal conflicts “knowing I [he] was a boy, but living as a girl” (p. 16). While lining up in kindergarten, the teacher had instructed the students to form two lines, one for boys and one for girls. Afterwards, the teacher took a private moment to ask why Lori was in line with the boys. Lori replied that she was “supposed to be a boy”, the teacher stated having an understanding of the situation but that perhaps it “could be something private” and suggested that it would be best for Lori to line up with the girls in the future (p. 4). From the writing, the teacher seemed compassionate and caring, with an understanding of Lori’s dilemma. This memory evoked a heartbreaking realization of just how many aspects of life would need deciphering for hir and other transgendered individuals. In addition to this, there was a silencing of Shenher’s true identity. As a reader I felt crushed for young Lori; one of the first times she reached out and spoke of her identity she was told to keep it secret. It may have been done with good intentions; trying to help Lori not be singled out or bullied but it seemed like the teacher’s suggestion may have encouraged hir to internalize. This internalization became a lifelong issue for Shenher.

One Christmas evening at her parents’ house Lori looked at the “Christmas gifts, which included lacy floral women’s pajamas-resigned to my grief” (p. 141). Lori was burdened by the pain of misunderstanding and fear of losing those she cared about. The morning she planned to come out to her parents, Lori looked at the family pictures hanging on the wall. “A deep sadness permeated what should have been a cocoon of comfort and safety...My [Lori’s] heart broke for

that little boy in the photos who tried so hard to look and act like a normal girl” (p. 142) for twenty-five years Lori had lived without them knowing the truth about who she really was.

In early adulthood, Lori was on an assignment at the Best of the West Pincher Creek cowboy poetry festival. As Lori knew no one there she had decided to attend an evening event in neutral, bordering on masculine, attire. This was the first time she had gone out dressed like this and it was a big change from her usual fashion choices. A vendor served Lori and addressed her with male pronouns. Reflecting upon the encounter Shenher wrote:

My face burned with both pride and embarrassment, the incredible high of being seen as a young man battling mightily with the shame of deception. In the past, I’d felt angry and frustrated when people assumed I was male, but today, in my cowboy clothes, it felt right, as though this was meant to be me. *Am I deceiving him if this is who I am?* (p. 125).

Shenher dressed to true to the way ze identified yet, is ze deceiving the vendor by allowing the vendor to see hir as ze truly identifies or is there a greater deception in allowing others to address hir as female when ze was meant to be male? This memory is another example of one of the internal dilemmas Lori faced on an ongoing basis.

When introducing his mother ze leads with “she was not warm, nor was she stone cold; my mother could best be characterized as English” (p. 6). Without making his mother seem cruel or bitter, Shenher writes in a way that allows the reader to understand some of the hurt ze experienced being raised as an “invisible man” (p. 186). From secretly scouting out private schools on Vancouver Island or making Lori a grad dress, the relationship between Shenher and his mother seems rife misunderstandings. Despite these misunderstandings, Lorimer seems thankful for his

mother and some of the attributes she passed on, for example, hers “ability to fit in anywhere” (p. 4). Towards the end of the book, you see a shift in their relationship as they become closer. A big moment for both Lorimer and his mother was when she introduced Lorimer as her son to the Father in the Catholic Church at Lorimer’s father’s funeral.

As a reader, you can clearly see the adoration Shenher had for his father and how he was idolized. From childhood memories to adolescence Lori looked up to her father and attempted to mimic his behaviours. One early example of this is when Lori’s father was shaving and Lori used a wooden popsicle stick to imitate her father’s actions. After sharing this memory Lorimer states that as “I grew, I tried to copy everything he did...careful not to appear obvious” (p. 28). The hurt experienced by Lori when she shifts from a child to a young woman was evident when ...After his father passed away Lorimer ends the chapter stating “my father was the best man I will ever know” (p. 277).

Lorimer states that he does not care why people read his book, only that he is thankful that readers are reading it. This memoir was written to help others understand his experiences as a transgendered individual. In the introduction, Lorimer wrote that he wrote this book for the “kid reading ... underneath the covers with a flashlight, terrified” with the goal of them finding hope (p. 2). Shenher shares his story and encourages others to “be strong” and to “know [their] inner world or [their] sense of self” (p. 2).

I did not find many limitations in this book. Perhaps one limitation would be that Shenher’s experiences are not universal, they are limited to his unique experiences growing up in a conservative catholic household and then relocating to a more liberal city. However, Lorimer was

able to write and share in a way that allows the reader to feel with him. The book was written with openness and vulnerability without crudeness nor crass. The stories and experiences shared, resonated with me and I trust that they would have the same effect on many other readers.

Post-secondary students in sociology, psychology, or gender studies would find “This One Looks Like a Boy: My Gender Journey to Life as a Man” to be a valuable primary source for understanding the experience of a transgendered individual in western Canada. The reading level appears to be at about a grade six level allowing for a wide range of readers to benefit from Lorimer’s book. I would recommend this book to anyone looking to understand what life with gender dysmorphia is like. Lorimer’s openness and vulnerability in writing show the struggle to live within a strictly gendered society as a non-conforming individual. Transgendered individuals or those questioning their gender as well as parents, caregivers, and general members of society would benefit from reading this memoir.

ⁱ Male pronouns (he, him, his) and the name Lorimer are used to refer to the author after his transition.

ⁱⁱ Neutral pronouns (ze, hir, hirs) or the name Shenher is used to identify a connection to both before and after transitioning.

ⁱⁱⁱ Female pronouns (she, her, hers) and the name Lori are used to identify the author prior to the transition.