



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

Autobiographies

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Since the 1930s, trans individuals have published autobiographies not only to tell or to clarify the stories of their lives but also to educate others in an effort to gain greater acceptance for trans people. Many of the early autobiographies were written by trans women, whose gender identities had been revealed by the press. Forced into the media spotlight because they were trans, their work often served as a response to the stereotypes and misinformation circulated about their experiences. In the 2000s, trans male autobiographies became more commonplace. Although comparatively fewer autobiographies have been published by nonbinary trans individuals, a growing number of such works in the 2010s, along with relatively more works by trans people of color and trans youth, have led to better representation of the diversity of trans identities.

Trans Autobiographies, 1933–1983

Given the unprecedented news coverage that Christine Jorgensen received beginning in 1952 for being the first publicly recognized person from the United States to have had what was then called a “sex change,” it is not surprising that her 1967 life story would be the most widely known among the early trans autobiographies. But the earliest trans autobiographies were published by Europeans; the first known book-length account is the narrative of Lili Elbe, a Danish painter who became one of the first individuals to undergo gender-affirming surgeries. Shortly before her death following one of these surgeries in 1931, Elbe requested that her friend Ernst Ludwig Huthorn Jacobson develop a book based on her diary entries, letters, and dictated material. Jacobson published the resulting work, *Man Into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*, posthumously under the pseudonym Niels Hoyer.

After *Man Into Woman*, another trans autobiography was apparently not published until 1954, when two works were written by British trans people in the wake of the international publicity surrounding Jorgensen’s transition. Robert Allen’s *But for the Grace: The True Story of a Dual Existence* describes how he was assigned female at birth but petitioned the British government to amend his birth certificate in 1944—one of the country’s earliest officially recognized gender changes. *Roberta Cowell’s Story by Herself* is an account by the woman who had the first known vaginoplasty in England and who was legally recognized as female in 1951.

Being the first British trans woman to undergo surgery and having achieved some fame previously as a race car driver, Cowell’s transition made headlines in Britain. The outing in the British tabloid press of models April Ashley and Caroline Cossey (known as Tula) generated similar public interest. Both recounted their experiences in 1982 autobiographies: *April Ashley’s Odyssey* and *I Am a Woman*, respectively. Even more attention was paid to the transition of renowned British author and travel correspondent Jan Morris, who wrote the best-selling *Conundrum* (1974).

In the United States, the best-known trans autobiography in the late 20th century was Renée Richards’s *Second Serve* (1983). Richards became famous in the 1970s for successfully suing to overturn a ban on her playing professional women’s tennis because she was a trans woman. But rather than discussing her court case or her pro tennis career, Richards devoted the majority of *Second Serve* to detailing her struggle to accept her gender identity. She detailed her subsequent life in *No Way Renée* (2007). Lesser known autobiographies of the era by U.S. trans women included socialite Dawn Langley Simmons’s *Man Into Woman* (1971), singer Canary Conn’s *Canary* (1974), journalist Nancy Hunt’s *Mirror Image* (1978), and Sharon Davis’s *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood* (1986), the first known autobiography by a Black trans person.

Notably absent from the 1960s through the 1980s were published narratives by trans men, with the major exception of Mario Martino’s *Emergence* (1977), which focused on his struggles to reconcile his sense of himself as a man with his conservative Catholic upbringing. A few trans male autobiographies were published in the 1990s, most notably Paul Hewitt’s *A Self-Made Man* (1995), Mark Rees’s *Dear Sir or Madam* (1996), and Dylan Scholinski’s *The Last Time I Wore a Dress* (1997). The latter book tells the horrific story of how Scholinski’s family institutionalized him during his high school years for his gender nonconformity.

Contemporary Trans Autobiographies

While not strictly autobiographies, the publication of Leslie Feinberg's semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Kate Bornstein's collection of personal essays and performance works *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (1994) helped usher in a new generation of trans narratives that were more than stories of personal acceptance and transition and that largely did not ascribe to stereotypical notions of gender, even if the author identified as a binary trans person. Moreover, the popularity of Feinberg's and Bornstein's works, along with the growing visibility of trans people, led publishers, including many major presses, to take a greater interest in trans books, and an unprecedented number of trans autobiographies were published in the early 21st century. The ease with which people can self-publish today has also contributed to the rapid growth in the number of books about individual trans experiences.

At the same time, the writers of trans autobiographies have become much more diverse. In the 20th century, there were only a few autobiographies by trans people of color published, notably Davis's work and the *Lady Chablis's Hiding My Candy* (1997). Although there continues to be a scarcity of autobiographies by trans people of color, the works of two of these authors have been among the most acclaimed in the genre. Janet Mock's *Redefining Realness* (2014) vividly illustrates the intersections of racism, classism, and transmisogyny, as she recounts how she struggled in her teens as a Black trans woman to pay for hormones and gender-affirming surgery and was only able to do so through sex work. In 2017, Mock released a follow-up memoir focusing on her experiences in her 20s, *Surpassing Certainty*. Willy Wilkinson's *Born on the Edge of Race and Gender* (2015) likewise offers an intersectional analysis of his experiences as an Asian American trans man, which includes having a chronic illness, medically transitioning, and being a father. Other notable autobiographies by trans people of color include Toni Newman's *I Rise* (2011) and Ryka Aoki's *Seasonal Velocities* (2012).

Similarly, while there had been few trans male autobiographies published in the 20th century, a number of such works have come out since then, including Jamison Green's *Becoming a Visible Man* (2004), Matt Kailey's *Just Add Hormones* (2005), Max Wolf Valerio's *The Testosterone Files* (2006), and Dhillon Khosla's *Both Sides Now* (2006). Green's book was especially significant because he told not only his own story but also the history of trans male community building, in which he was a central figure.

Reflecting how more and more trans people are identifying as nonbinary, a growing number of trans autobiographies are by nonbinary individuals. The most celebrated of these works is Jacob Tobia's *Sissy* (2019), which they subtitle "a coming-of-gender story," as the book relates how they came to embrace their femininity and take pride in their gender nonconformity, such as simultaneously having facial hair and wearing high heels. Another acclaimed nonbinary autobiography is Maia Kobabe's graphic memoir *Gender Queer* (2019), which describes coming-of-age experiences like starting school, getting one's period, and beginning to date from the perspective of someone who is nonbinary and asexual.

Still, the vast majority of trans autobiographies continue to be published by trans women. Among such works published since the late 1990s are books by Jayne County, Deirdre McCloskey, Aleshia Brevard, Calpernia Addams, Donna Rose, Beth Elliott, Kristin Beck, and Sarah McBride. The most prolific and best-selling trans autobiographer is English professor and New York Times Contributing Opinion Writer Jennifer Finney Boylan. Beginning with *She's Not There* (2003) and continuing with *I'm Looking Through You* (2008), *Stuck in the Middle With You* (2013), and *Good Boy* (2020), Boylan has discussed such topics as her marriage (which continued after her transition), parenting, and her experiences with having dogs throughout her life. Another trans female autobiographer of note is poet and English professor Joy Ladin, who described her struggles with being true to herself and how her transition affected her family, career, and Jewish beliefs in *Through the Door of Life* (2012). Ladin, the first openly trans person to be teaching at an Orthodox Jewish university, further formulated her thoughts on being trans and Jewish in *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah From a Transgender Perspective* (2018). Another important Jewish trans narrative is Abby Stein's *Becoming Eve: My Journey From Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi to Transgender Woman* (2019).

Because of the plethora of trans autobiographies since the early 2000s, a trans person today has to have a unique experience in order to interest most major publishers in their stories. A case in point is Thomas Beatie, a trans man who became famous for becoming pregnant and giving birth to a child after transitioning. His life

story, *Labor of Love* (2008), was published soon after his first child was born.

As in the past, trans people who were famous before they came out publicly as trans became even more known afterward and took advantage of their celebrity status (and ghostwriters) to publish their autobiographies in the 2000s. Chaz Bono, the child of Sonny Bono and Cher, wrote *Transition* (2011), and gold-medal-winning Olympic decathlete and reality television star Caitlyn Jenner wrote *The Secrets of My Life* (2017). Jenner's book became a bestseller but more because of her star power than the quality of her narrative.

Another celebrity to write an autobiography, YouTube and reality television personality Jazz Jennings, was part of a new trend in trans autobiographies in the 2010s: books by trans youth. Her book, *Being Jazz* (2016), recounts not just her moments of fame but also her struggles to be seen as female, which included the need for her family to fight for her right to play girls' soccer. Two other trans youth autobiographies are Katie Rain Hill's *Rethinking Normal* (2014) and Arin Andrews's *Some Assembly Required* (2014). The two books are companion pieces: The writers—a trans woman and trans man, respectively—medically transitioned in their mid-teens and dated each other, which both discuss in their works, which they wrote in their late teens. Hill's account is the more heartbreaking: Because of bullying from other youth and internalized self-hatred, she tried to take her life at 8 years old and continued to suffer through her tween years before accepting herself. But the most heart-rending youth narrative is Zane Thimmesch-Gill's *Hiding in Plain Sight* (2015), in which he describes being homeless as a teen and having to survive on the streets because he could no longer tolerate his family's hostility. The autobiographies by trans youth vividly demonstrate the importance of parental support. For these authors, it was the difference between being able to socially and medically transition relatively easily versus having to struggle to embody one's identity.

The Evolution of Trans Autobiographies

Trans autobiographies, like trans people themselves, have significantly progressed over the past 75 years. As trans people have become less of a sensation in the dominant society, so too have their personal narratives focused less on the spectacle of being trans. Today, trans autobiographers can write memoirs that address the complexities of their lives and can be more than their gender identities.

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See also [Bono, Chaz](#); [Bornstein, Kate](#); [Boylan, Jennifer Finney](#); [Elbe, Lili](#); [Feinberg, Leslie](#); [Jenner, Caitlyn](#); [Jennings, Jazz](#); [Jorgensen, Christine](#); [Mock, Janet](#); [Morris, Jan](#); [Richards, Renée](#)

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