



# How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States

By Joanne Meyerowitz



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*How Sex Changed* is a fascinating social, cultural, and medical history of transsexuality in the United States. Joanne Meyerowitz tells a powerful human story about people who had a deep and unshakable desire to transform their bodily sex. In the last century when many challenged the social categories and hierarchies of race, class, and gender, transsexuals questioned biological sex itself, the category that seemed most fundamental and fixed of all.

From early twentieth-century sex experiments in Europe, to the saga of Christine Jorgensen, whose sex-change surgery made headlines in 1952, to today's growing transgender movement, Meyerowitz gives us the first serious history of transsexuality. She focuses on the stories of transsexual men and women themselves, as well as a large supporting cast of doctors, scientists, journalists, lawyers, judges, feminists, and gay liberationists, as they debated the big questions of medical ethics, nature versus nurture, self and society, and the scope of human rights.

In this story of transsexuality, Meyerowitz shows how new definitions of sex circulated in popular culture, science, medicine, and the law, and she elucidates the tidal shifts in our social, moral, and medical beliefs over the twentieth century, away from sex as an evident biological certainty and toward an understanding of sex as something malleable and complex. *How Sex Changed* is an intimate history that illuminates the very changes that shape our understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality today.



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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

When ex-GI George Jorgensen changed his sex and took on a new identity as Christine in 1952, the lurid journalism that followed focused on questions of Jorgensen's genitals, her sexual performance and her sexual availability set the tone for how U.S. media understood and discussed transsexuality. So argues Meyerowitz, professor of history at the Indiana University, at the beginning of this first complete history of American transsexualism. Carefully tracing the next 50 years of science and public attitudes surrounding transsexuality, Meyerowitz charts a number of fascinating historical moments: the complicated relationship between the gay rights movement and transsexuals in the mid-'60s; the deeply negative response that transsexuals had to Gore Vidal's Myra Breckenridge (Jorgensen thought of suing him); the complex battles to grant transsexuals a different legal sexual identity; how transsexuality became "sexy" through the careers of performers such as Coccinelle. While the book is scholarly in orientation, Meyerowitz's easy, readable style makes her thorough research in a wide range of fields accessible and enjoyable, even when she is detailing such subjects as internecine fighting among psychiatrists over the merits of sex-change operations. Meyerowitz thinks we have a much broader appreciation of gender and much more tolerance of gender variance these days, but she also sees that media visibility is not entirely positive, since most portrayals show transgender people as "freaks" or comic oddballs. On the whole, the book is an invaluable introduction to how ideas about gender and sexuality have evolved.

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From Library Journal

Christine Jorgenson wasn't the first person to undergo sex-change surgery, but her media-savvy personality and glamorous looks made her a household name in the 1950s. Historian Meyerowitz chronicles the saga of transsexuals themselves, including their struggles for access to sex transformation and their continued problems with discrimination both from the conservative Right and from gays and feminists who saw them as "infiltrators." She also shows how the phenomenon of transsexuality led physicians and academics to make elaborate distinctions between gender and sex and to ponder the origins of both in nature and nurture and how these ideas slowly entered common discourse. Although this book is accessibly written and is the first book to treat transsexuality exclusively, the narrowness of the subjects recommends it primarily for academic and research libraries. Smaller public libraries need a less specialized text such as John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman's *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*.

Mary Ann Hughes, Neill P.L., Pullman, WA

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From [Booklist](#)

Meyerowitz, teacher and editor (of the *Journal of American History*), uses both skills to explain a confusing subject and pilot readers through a morass of changing terminology and interpretations. During the last 50 years, members of the general public, medical and legal personnel, and transsexuals themselves have all tried to describe transsexuality and its many ramifications. Meyerowitz highlights the contributions of leading medical pioneers, such as Harry Benjamin and John Money, and transsexuals, including Christine Jorgensen and others less famous. The book might have bogged down in the anatomical, chromosomal, psychological, and social aspects of the differences between men and women, but Meyerowitz avoids this by maintaining focus on major trends and attitudes. She cites carefully chosen persons, organizations, and publications to demonstrate the gradual development of the now generally accepted idea of maleness and femaleness occupying a qualitative continuum rather than representing polar conditions. Detailed and informative, and

well supported by references and notes, Meyerowitz's work is commendable to anyone seriously interested in transsexuality. *William Beatty*

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