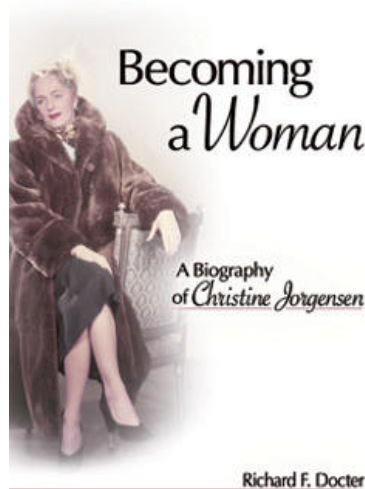




Entertainment :: Books

Becoming a Woman: The Christine Jorgensen Story

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New York Editor - In-Chief
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In 1952, the front page of the Daily News blazed with a headline that "Ex-G.I. Becomes Blonde Beauty." With that, George Jorgensen, a quiet, shy young man from the Bronx, burst into the public eye like a blazing comet.

Over 50 years later, it's impossible to imagine the impact that Christine Jorgensen had on the United States, indeed on the whole world. She wasn't the world's first male-to-female transsexual, but, in one of those perfect historical storms, she became a touchstone for every compass point on the 1950s roadmap: the changing nature of human identity; science as a determinant of identity; the encroachment of medicine on human behavior.

At least as important, she came along just as Dr. Alfred Kinsey was publishing his explosive results of his extensive studies into human sexuality. Sex roles, he found, were a good deal more fluid than Ozzie and Harriett or Donna Reed on the tube could ever envision. And then there

was the power of the media, which had always been great, but with TV adding to radio, newspapers and film reels, was reaching into every aspect of Americans' lives.

Into all of this stepped Jorgensen. Her impact can only be compared to a handful of other 20th century comets that flashed across the public consciousness: the Lindbergh Baby Kidnapping; Edward VIII and Mrs. Simpson; Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio; the Beatles; Kennedy's assassination; O.J. Simpson's trial; the death of Princess Diana.

If you doubt that Jorgensen's sex change ranks with these events, only consider that the Associated Press had more inches of copy devoted to her in the first half of 1953 than to anyone else--including newly inaugurated President Eisenhower.

Why her? What happened?

It is to Docter's credit that he reaches beyond the sensational into the intimate. He has made a media figure a human being; in the process, Christine Jorgensen has been posthumously been given her humanity back.

Richard Docter is not gay. He is apparently a happily married family man. I mention this because it makes his sympathy for Jorgensen all the more remarkable. In fact, Docter has devoted most of his professional career to studying, understanding and furthering the lives of transsexuals.

His insight shines on every page. He has taken the very thick stack of clippings, along with the voluminous interviews Jorgensen gave to the press and her own (somewhat heavily self-edited) autobiography and added interviews with anyone still alive who is associated with this amazing story.

George Jorgensen came from a loving immigrant Scandinavian family who lived in the Throg's Neck section of the Bronx, then as now a white ethnic enclave of tidy homes tucked into the foot of Long Island Sound. His childhood doesn't appear to have been particularly happy or unhappy. He did indeed serve in the Army, although not for very long: It was the end of the Second World War, and the government was more interested in getting people out uniform than putting new men into them.

George was, however, unhappy and restless as a man. What makes his so extraordinary is that he set about trying to figure it out. He relentlessly pursued any kind of expert of whom he had heard a whisper. He tracked down every available book on the subject. There wasn't much there, but if there was anything at all, he discovered it.

He finally trekked to Denmark, where he went from George to Christine, thanks to the good offices of a research doctor, who cheerfully admitted that he took Jorgensen on as a patient for his value as an investigatory subject. But the doctor wasn't some mad scientist. He was caring and kind, as was his family.

Jorgensen spent a long time in Denmark. He had apparently tried to keep his new identity under wraps, but, in a process that is still the subject of dispute, the press somehow got wind of his transformation.

By the time he-- now a she--landed at what would become Kennedy Airport in New York, she was treated with the kind of media frenzy that would accompany the Beatles 10 years later in the same place. Jorgensen had a wild press conference, where she managed to keep her poise even though she was assaulted with all kinds of personal, leading and insulting questions.

Perhaps how the quiet George emerged to become the sophisticated Christine is something that we will never understand. It is one of the principal themes of Doctor's book, and, if he doesn't quite solve the riddle, he offers many explanations.

Whatever happened, Christine became a fairly savvy exploiter of her newfound megafame. She cobbled together a nightclub act with the help of a showbiz hack; for the rest of her life, she would go on off the boards as a way to make money and keep her name in the public eye.

Jorgensen didn't really have any performing talents per se, but she was indeed beautiful, and she had a commanding presence. Most people simply wanted to gawk at her in close range, something she was aware of. But, like Gypsy Rose Lee, she could say that, if they were laughing, well, she was laughing too.

Jorgensen did make a huge amount of money in her salad years. She bought a house in an upscale Long Island suburb where she lived with her parents. She had beautiful clothes (many of them sewn by herself) and seemed permanently attached to animal skins in cold weather. She liked expensive jewelry. She was never without a cigarette, and liked her cocktails. She was, in short, a real broad, a total woman. It's completely fitting that her signature song was Rodgers and Hammerstein's I Enjoy Being a Girl.

But she was more. She was a complicated personality. Even though she bore slights well, sometimes she did understandably react to people's ignorance. She adamantly refused throughout her life to submit to a complete physical public exam. She remained coy about her sex life, which she (rightfully) considered private.

Everything she did made headlines because everything she did broke precedent and called into question the meaning of "male" and "female." Getting a driver's license or a passport became front-page news. She nearly married.

Jorgensen lived long enough to see the modern gay rights movement begin to transform society. Today, the trans movement looks to her as their godmother and patron saint, as well they should. Her groundbreaking story paved the way for Americans to re-examine their lives.

Even though trans prejudice remains widespread, Jorgensen broke the dam and began a national discussion that continues to this day. Doctor's wonderful biography should be read and treasured as a necessary documentation of one of the most important LGBT pioneers of the last century.

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