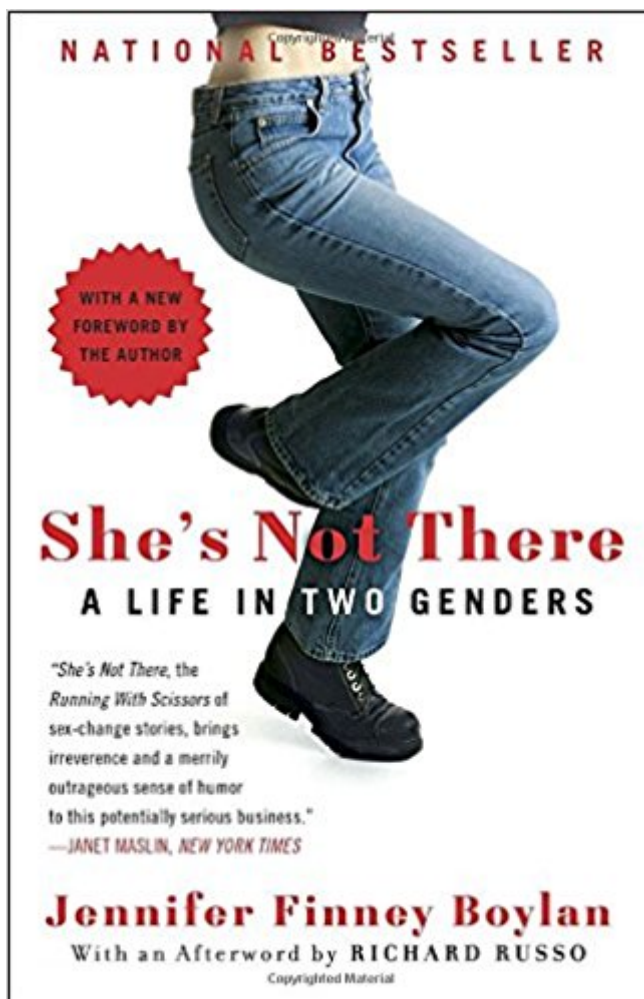


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# She's Not There: A Life In Two Genders



## Synopsis

The provocative bestseller *She Was Not There* is the exuberant memoir of a man named James who became a woman named Jenny. *She Was Not There* is the story of a person changing genders, the story of a person bearing and finally revealing a complex secret; above all, it is a love story. By turns hilarious and deeply moving, Jennifer Finney Boylan explores the remarkable territory that lies between men and women, examines changing friendships, and rejoices in the redeeming power of family. *She Was Not There* is a portrait of a loving marriage—the love of James for his wife, Grace, and, against all odds, the enduring love of Grace for the woman who becomes her “sister,” Jenny. To this extraordinary true story, Boylan brings the humorous, fresh voice that won her accolades as one of the best comic novelists of her generation. With her distinctive and winning perspective, *She Was Not There* explores the dramatic outward changes and unexpected results of life as a woman: Jenny fights the urge to eat salad, while James consumed plates of ribs; gone is the stability of “one damn mood, all the damn time.” While Boylan’s own secret was unusual, to say the least, she captures the universal sense of feeling uncomfortable, out of sorts with the world, and misunderstood by her peers. Jenny is supported on her journey by her best friend, novelist Richard Russo, who goes from begging his friend to “Be a man” (in every sense of the word) to accepting her as an attractive, buoyant woman. “The most unexpected thing,” Russo writes in his Afterword to the book, “is in how Jenny’s story we recognize our shared humanity.” As James evolves into Jennifer in scenes that are by turns tender, startling, and witty, a marvelously human perspective emerges on issues of love, sex, and the fascinating relationship between our physical and our intuitive selves. Through the clear eyes of a truly remarkable woman, *She Was Not There* provides a new window on the often confounding process of accepting ourselves.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Boylan, English professor and author of the critically acclaimed novels *The Constellations* (1994), *The Planets* (1991), and *Getting In* (1998), began life as a male named James Boylan. In this autobiography, she details her lifelong struggle with her burgeoning femaleness and the path she followed to become a female, both physically and mentally. For 40 years, the author lived as a man, seemingly happy and even marrying a woman and fathering two children. At a certain point, though, she realized that she couldn't suppress her desire to live as a female and so eventually went through all the steps to become female, including sexual reassignment surgery. There is something troubling about Boylan's lighthearted tone, and while she hints at it, there is no really clear depiction of the havoc this transition must have wreaked on her married life (Boylan's wife was clearly devastated) and on her children (who at times refer to her as boygirl or maddy). But Boylan's well-written and informative book is a worthy contribution to the body of work on this subject.

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"She's Not There, the Running with Scissors of sex-change stories, brings irreverence and a merrily outrageous sense of humor to this potentially serious business." • Janet Maslin, *New York Times* "Beautifully crafted, fearless, painfully honest, inspiring, and extremely witty. Jennifer Finney Boylan is an exquisite writer with a fascinating story, and this combination has resulted in one of the most remarkable, moving, and unforgettable memoirs in recent history." • Augusten Burroughs, author of *Running with Scissors and Dry*

Jennifer -- formerly James -- was already an establishment and highly praise writer before she wrote this, the first of three books about her social and surgical transformation, crossing over from her male gender from an anatomically sexual perspective to the female--which matches the anatomical brain as well as her spirit and psyche. Perhaps what makes this one of the best books on the subject is her uncanny sense of wit and juxtaposition of her histories. Because of this book, I have

pre-ordered her next fictional novel, due out in April.

i just finished this book, purchased in spite of all the reviews that mentioned how poor 'Grace' was underrepresented. actually, i bought it in part because of those. i enjoyed the book, and i might have learned a few things. i enjoyed the writing, and the description of what it is like to be this particular 'other'. the author and her bestie discuss what identity is in terms of choosing who to present as. but my experience has been more like discovering what i am - not who. self is known; the details are murky. i appreciate fine writing that shows the struggle, the confusion, the weirdness of it all in a society that is very very sure that identity is static, and of course is very very wrong. as for the attitude / altitude in the book, i have that optimism as well. it stays there, enhancing my emotional baseline, always. i'm not trans, but i am a lesbian, and my husband left me for a straight woman, and .... i had stayed, for years. i would have stayed forever [ even now, 9 years later]. so i understand jenny's staying part, and maybe a small part of a possible not staying part, and perhaps some of 'grace's staying part, and a lot of the 'buoyancy' part. it seems very clear that 'grace' and jenny have a really good marriage, a close, positive marriage, and so it's not surprising that she acted as she did. she suffered, she lived, she managed; what most of us do in our dramas, large and small. she was inclined that way. i do believe that women tend to stay, while men leave, for very complex reasons. while i appreciated her words, i'm sad that 'grace' felt she should write her response because of all the shouting and 'not fair's ostensibly on her behalf. trans and the rest of the queer rainbow have never, ever been all that weird to me. i am just lucky, that way, i guess. i never struggled with that part of my identity, but it is obvious that some people do. but the weirdest thing to me is that strangers struggle - and argue with - someone else's identity. and i don't mean when someone is in the closet. i mean a stated, struggled for identity, and here are friends, family, colleagues, etc., proclaiming that it's not so because they don't believe it or haven't felt it, or whatever denial mechanism they feel they need. i don't believe in jesus, but it's abundantly clear that many people do, why argue? but i guess that's what makes this a book, and not a moment. it's a well-written book. i like how it dances thru time, i like the buoyancy. i like the afterword by jenny's friend. i love how it all comes together.

I read this book when I was employed full time as a counselor; now, over a decade later, I still give this book to friends who want to learn more about transpeople. I know of no other Memoir which is so compelling that you would read it in a single sitting if you could---except maybe Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes." In fact, there are similarities between the two styles: great humor (including the

ability to laugh at oneself) which does not preclude the writers' abilities to document great sorrows, timeliness---the sense of emerging in a culture not primed to understand some of the issues, and just good writing. The book sings. Especially poignant is the chapter about a faculty exchange with University College Cork when all the pub songs about emigration resonated: leaving a place you know, leaving your sweetheart, headed for a destination one hopes will somehow be better, anticipation, soft terror. This book was a landmark for the trans community and it ought to be heralded for the human community as we are all in this business of loving and living together. And Richard Russo's *Afterward* is a bonus.

I was attracted to this memoir because I read a very good essay by Jennifer Finney Boylan in the *New York Times Magazine*. I appreciated the fact, that like Jan Morris, Ms. Finney Boylan is a writer, first and foremost. I read *CONUNDRUM* and also Christine Jorgensen's book. I've always been interested in this topic. I believe Ms. Boylan wrote a heartfelt and honest autobio that was poetic at times, however, was also curiously amateurish for a seasoned writer. Sometimes there was too much extraneous detail about the activities of the family, too many dates and facts, no one but a schedule book needs to know; often the faux pas made by an amateur. Also, Ms. Boylan kept repeating how known she was for her humor, but I didn't find the book particularly funny. I totally empathize with her and her life struggle, and believe she has successfully accomplished her mythical hero's quest to find her true identity. But I felt deeper insights and nuance were lacking. I also think it was a major mistake to ask her friend Richard Russo to write a chapter from his point of view. This felt like a distracting intrusion. Unfortunately, Russo's prose was so much sharper and philosophically penetrating than Boylan's, that it made Boylan's pale by comparison. I get that they are super friends, but it's not a good idea to invite your friend to enter your book and then steal it. Also, I don't think Russo had anything particularly new or insightful to say. He reacted rather typically. It's just that he expressed this so well. All in all, the book raised interesting conundrums *visa vie* gender and identity. It would be a good text for a course on this subject, though I still think Morris said it deeper and better.

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