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A Queer and Pleasant Danger: The True Story of a Nice Jewish Boy who Joins the Church of Scientology, and Leaves Twelve Years Later to Become the Lovely Lady She is Today by Kate Bornstein (2012): Book Review

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**A Queer and Pleasant Danger:
The True Story of a Nice Jewish Boy
who Joins the Church of Scientology,
and Leaves Twelve Years Later to
Become the Lovely Lady She is
Today by Kate Bornstein (2012):
Book Review**

*This essay, which describes my curiosity on transgender identity, is a book review of the memoir by Kate Bornstein, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger: The True Story of a nice Jewish boy Who Joins the Church of Scientology, and Leaves Twelve Years Later to Become the Lovely Lady she is Today* (2012).*

A few years ago, working at a local supermarket, the manager I worked for transitioned from male to female. Right before transitioning, my manager, who was very open, honest and direct, asked me, “Is this a problem for you?” At that point I’d heard of transgender people but had never known one. I told my manager it was not a problem for me, even though I felt shocked and anxious. I needed that job. The fact that we had trust and a

good working relationship already helped. However, I also didn't want to judge, be bigoted, or hurt my manager's feelings, but I did feel anxious. This was all new for me.

So my manager took a little time off, and came back as a transwoman. It weirded me out. Standing near my manager, or talking work matters, I was very aware: this person had a sex change! How and why would someone do this? Raised religious in Jamaica, I wondered, is this "right?" But after a few days seeing the "new" version of my manager, I was less conscious of and calmer about the sex change. Even though my manager's voice was changing, they were saying the same things, acting the same way as before, and treating me the same. Looking back now, it's hard for me to understand being so worried about it all, but I know that I was at the time.

Though I never lost awareness of the sex change, I found that I could laugh with, be near, and work effectively with this person as we had before the transition. My manager seemed in most ways, except for appearance, dress and voice, to be the same person, just a little happier. I examined my attitudes. I saw myself adjust. I realized that all I needed my manager to be was hardworking, honest, and fair. None of that had changed. My manager treated me the

same way as before. It was not as though I "needed" my manager to have a certain gender identity. It really did not matter at all.

This entire experience really heightened my curiosity to dig a little deeper into the transgender subject. So when I chose a book to review, I picked the 2012 memoir by Kate Bornstein, who was born Al Bornstein: *A Queer and Pleasant Danger: The True Story of a nice Jewish boy Who Joins the Church of Scientology, and Leaves Twelve Years Later to Become the Lovely Lady she is Today.*

I braced myself as I began to read. I had known my store manager, but I did not "know" this author. Could I understand, accept, and adjust to a stranger's transition the way I had with my manager? What would it say about me, a woman, a person of color, and an immigrant, if I could not relate to someone else who also faced people prejudging, stereotyping, and deciding who they were and how stranger's felt about them before knowing them? I had felt a bit bad about how tense I had been after my store manager transitioned. I felt as though I had doubted someone I liked, and I did not like the feeling.

I was surprised that not only did I relate to the book and author, but I also found the book to be emotionally powerful. It also cleared up questions and confusion I had had about trans

people, transvestitism, being lesbian, etc. The book showed me someone very different from anyone I have ever known personally, but, despite the gap between her and me, I could see her as a human being with feelings, someone who in many ways is just like me and I think like most people. As a mother myself, I related to this loving parent.

If the book's ideas had to be narrowed down to only one, it would be: *don't lie*. This idea is introduced in the preface. In a way, this book is all about lying. It is about the pressure on people to lie to themselves and society. To lie about who they are, whom they love, and what they like. The book explores the cost of lying, and about how great it feels to tell the truth. I realized that the fact that my manager had been my boss probably made me more willing to try out the new situation than I might have been if the roles reversed and I had been the manager. That realization made me understand why someone might not want to disclose their transition. Such a disclosure puts a person at risk for rejection, and worse.

Another central idea from the memoir is that despite how different Bornstein's life and path have been from most people's lives and paths, *she is a person just like everyone else*. She loves her child. She has mixed feelings about her childhood, her family, her sibling, and her parents. She wants to be happy and "do her own

thing," but she also wants to please, or at least not disappoint, other people, particularly her family. Who cannot relate to that?

Many aspects of her life that she mentions in the preface are things that set her apart from most people. For example, before writing the book, Bornstein tattooed "You must not tell lies" on her hand. Judaism bans tattoos, so as a result she cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery, setting her apart. More differences? Bornstein (2012) enjoyed cutting herself, being cut, feeling her blood flow, and sadomasochistic sex. She drank excessively to the point of blacking out, did street and prescription drugs, and had various types of sex with many men and many women. She writes and publishes porn, suffers from borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, a slow-growing form of leukemia/cancer, depression, and anorexia. She has a fake knee and piercings in body parts she was not born with. One final way that Bornstein (2012) announces she is different is that she, unlike most people, tells us not to trust her, that others say to disregard her, and that she is seen as evil by many people, including the Church of Scientology, and probably by her ex-wife.

Most people try to convince us to trust them, conceal the fact that they are imperfect, and ignore or conceal

criticism of themselves by other people. Bornstein (2012) does the opposite, saying, “Google her” to verify what she is saying is true, do not trust her because she lies. Lying is the central theme in Bornstein’s (2012) life. From age four when she realized (as a young boy) that she felt like a girl, Bornstein knew instinctively that society would not be kind about this, and that Bornstein’s parents would be devastated if “Little Al” was not a “normal” boy. Bornstein’s parents sent her to a relative psychologist when she was a little older because they were concerned. She tried to be everything she is not, to follow in her father’s footsteps as a wrestler, but failed miserably. She does become good at lying. Bornstein (2012) discovered science fiction, became a fan, and wrote some herself at an early age. Often in science fiction, the concept of “male” and “female” is erased or altered, an idea Bornstein (2012) found very appealing.

In high school, she got into theatre, the one place where it is OK to “lie,” to “fool people” about who you are, and also OK to be a boy but to dress as, speak as, and look like a girl. She worked on shows, had keys to the costume cabinets, and dressed up in secret as a woman. She learned makeup. She saw acting as lying and realized she was a natural liar, perhaps because she had had so much practice and been so motivated from an early age. She got into a pre-med

program but dropped out, disappointing her parents terribly. Later on, she worked for the Church of Scientology, travelling all around the United States and Europe. Later, she became a professional writer of both porn and non-porn books.

Fiction writers make things up. That is what fiction is. It all ties into the lying she did her entire life. Lying that she was a boy when she felt like a girl. Lying that she wanted to have sex with specific women when she mostly just wanted to BE those women or be like them. Lying that she did not have a problem with alcohol or drugs when she drank until she blacked out and became addicted to drugs. Lying that she was just a “regular guy” when she was anything but that. Lying that she was macho when she was actually submissive and enjoyed being dominated. Her life, to a point, was a lie. Much of the lying was done to survive, to protect, to avoid upsetting parents, employers, co-workers, and other people.

One episode from when Bornstein (2012) worked as a top officer aboard a Scientology-owned ship is telling. There was a flag that got stuck high on a mast that needed to be yanked out of where it was stuck, but everyone aboard refused to climb up. It was a risky climb, and anyone who did this risked their life. Who would do such a thing? A person would have to be brave or crazy, or both.

Bornstein decided to lead by example and make the climb herself. Everyone stood on the deck below, mesmerized, watching. Bornstein had a fear of heights, which only made this feat more remarkable. Despite terrible, paralyzing fear, Bornstein made the highly risky climb, freed the flag, and was hailed as a hero and a brave man. But the whole time Bornstein was up there, she was thinking about killing herself (p. 90). What this episode reveals is that she did not feel like a brave man even though she spent much of her life trying to look like one, trying to be one, to please her father, to be accepted by society, and to feel good about herself. She looked like a man on the outside, but felt a totally opposite way on the inside. This mast climb captured the life she led until events spiraled more and more out of control. Once she got older and her marriage broke up, and was kicked out of the Church of Scientology, she finally decided, with the help of a therapist, to face her issues, stop lying, and be who she felt she was meant to be, who she felt she was: a woman, and in Bornstein's case, a lesbian woman. Even later in life and the book, Bornstein (2012) says that she is not a man, not a woman, but something else.

After marrying three different women, Bornstein (2012) realized that she wanted to live as a woman, and she went into therapy and started to transition her

life from male to female identity. In Bornstein's case, this meant taking time off work for surgery, then going back to the same job, same office, and same co-workers she had worked with as a man, but now coming back in as a woman, wearing woman's clothing, and going by a woman's name. Fortunately for Bornstein (2012), with the exception of one fundamentalist Christian who was very uncomfortable and judgmental and rejected Bornstein (p. 176), her manager and co-workers supported her transition.

This episode from Bornstein's life echoed mine at work. There was quiet talk from some workers who called my manager a freak, but the talk died down a few days after my manager returned in the "new" gender. Some of this calming down was because the manager was doing the same job the same way, and the transition became "old news." Also, people liked the manager before the transition, and were rooting for the manager to be happy. The few people who were vocal and negative adjusted. Things calmed down. To me, this suggested that people often fear what they do not know. Actually working with, meeting, and reading about transgender people in their own words has radically shifted how I feel and think about transgender people, from abstract anxiety to concrete familiarity. I have real reference points now in my life, and

I just see people. The transgender aspect is only one part of them. Just as I am more than being “just” a woman, or a person of color, or a mother, or a worker, or a student, or an animal lover, or an immigrant, transmen and transwomen are more than their transgender status. It is only one aspect, and it is not all defining.

In the preface, Bornstein (2012) states she has two goals for writing this book: “reconciliation with my daughter’s life in Scientology, and coming to terms with the ghost of my dead father” (p. iii). These goals seem very genuine, and it is obvious throughout the book that her daughter and her father are very much on Bornstein’s mind. I think these goals also are relatable to most people. Although the reader never learns whether Bornstein (2012) achieves these two goals, there also seem to be other goals: Bornstein (2012) wants to earn money, gain some fame, and advocate for people who are “different.” Bornstein (2012) wants to urge the reader to “be yourself” and not lie about who you are, who you love, and what makes you happy. Bornstein (2012) writes truth to make sense of her life. Bornstein convinces most readers to read to the end. She convinces readers that she is not a freak who is totally unrelatable and apart from everyone, but is in fact just a person with preferences and desires and tastes and issues like

everyone else, trying to be happy, loving her child, doing the best she can often with no or little support. I see the book as a success and found Bornstein (2012) to be honest, relatable and inspiring.

This book would be interesting and valuable to anyone who likes memoirs or biographies. It would also appeal to someone who has experienced eating disorders, gender identity issues, parental pressure to be a square peg in a round hole, societal pressure to be thin or look pretty or strong or powerful, or who has had physical, psychological, emotional or substance issues, who’s married, divorced, had kids, loved, been loved, or wanted to be. In short, I think this book is good for almost any adult to read. It might seem as though it is about a strange person, and in a way, it is, but it is also about all of us. We all just want to be happy, try to figure things out, try to survive, want to be close with family, friends and lovers, want acceptance, but also want to be who we really are without having to lie about it.

I came across an article reporting how at risk the transgender population is for murder (Hauser, 2018). As a woman, person of color, and immigrant, I relate to being at more risk for violence. It does not feel good, but it is real. It can be deadly real, at times. Within that context, lying suddenly does not look so much like dishonesty, but it begins to look like a survival technique.

Disclosure of gender identity and sexual preference can be very risky, not just domestically, but globally. As a woman of color with an accent that reveals me to be an immigrant, there are times when I feel that I have things a little harder than some other people (for example, a white male born in America) because of these aspects. I began to wonder: In order to make my life easier, if I could conceal that fact that I am a woman, a person of color, and an immigrant, would I? And if so, what does that say about “lying” to survive? How am I to judge someone for concealing information about themselves when I have never been in a position to know whether I might do the same, if I could? This book raised a number of issues I had never considered before.

One great thing the book does is lay out things I have struggled to understand in clear ways. What is gender identity? Gender identity is whether you feel like a man or a woman. It is not about anatomy. Bornstein (2012) was born physically male but felt female. From an early age, she grew up feeling as though she was a girl, wanting to be a girl. She then lived as a woman, had surgery to be a woman, came out as a lesbian, and now says she is not a man, not a woman, but something else. What is sexual preference? Sexual preference is, basically, who you are attracted to. Some

people are attracted to men, some people to women, some people find both attractive, and some people do not find anyone attractive. Bornstein (2012) wanted to be a man, felt like a girl, found both women and men attractive, and in later life, realized that part of her attraction was identification. She wanted to be like the person as opposed to be with the person.

Except for the preface, when Bornstein (2012) identifies solely as female, 63, and a lesbian, the book tracks the life of a person who starts out being identified as a man and transitions into re-identifying as a woman. The reader tags along with Bornstein (2012) and understands what she went through on the road to becoming a woman.

In terms of style, this book is very matter of fact, down to earth, using everyday language. Every now and then Bornstein (2012) gets a bit dramatic, but it works because she is talking about dramatic events. For example, early in the book she talks about some fond memories of her daughter, Jessica, as a young girl. The memories continue as Bornstein (2012) then talks of putting Jessica on a plane to visit Bornstein’s (2012) wife, Molly, who’s living someplace else for work, and then: “The Mexican divorce papers from Molly arrived on my desk two weeks later. I did not see Jessica again for another five years” (p. 124). Reading the quote, I felt

like someone punched me in the gut, like MY child had been stolen. It shocked me, came out of the blue, like it did for Bornstein (2012). That is good writing.

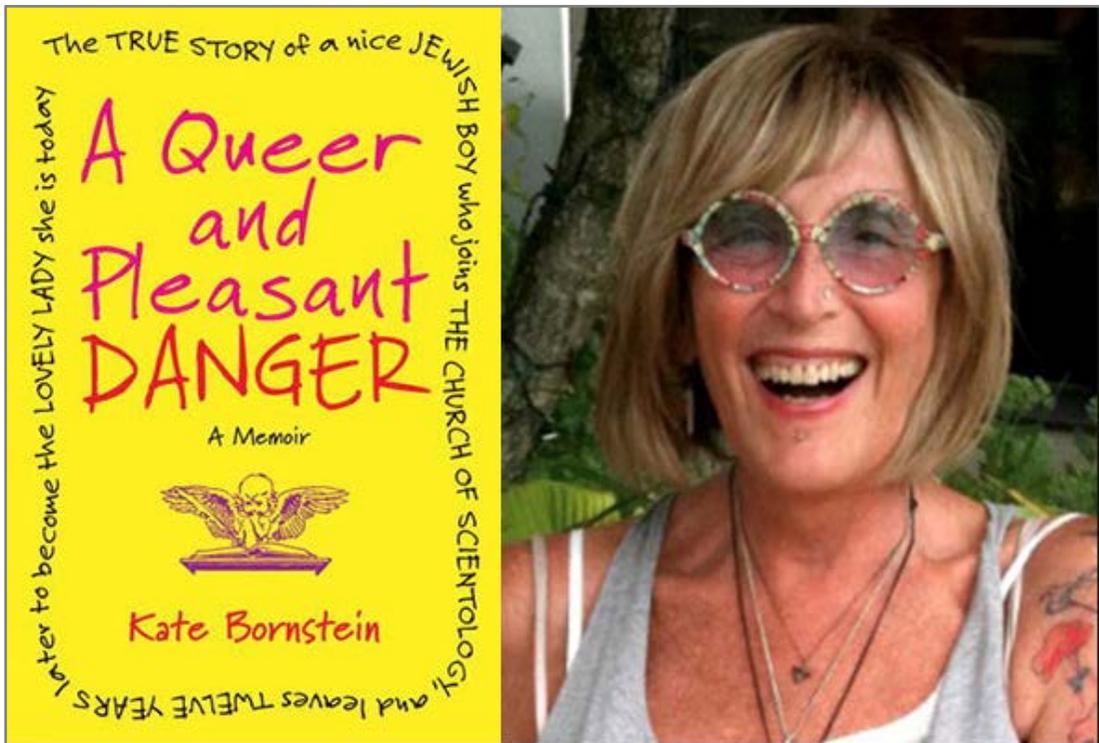
Working with a transgender person before and after surgery, having met several transgender people after that, having interviewed a trans person for a class project, and now, having read and reviewed this book, I am at a very different place with the transgender issue. Knowing actual people who have gone through this, understanding why they want to transition, and seeing it play out in real life has allowed me to look at my assumptions and unconscious beliefs and make what I think is a change for the better.

People are just people, they come in different flavors, and most people are just trying to get through the day, survive and be happy. To accomplish this, all through the book Bornstein (2012) urges readers to think for themselves, judge for themselves, verify other people's claims, and to tell the truth to themselves

and others about who they are, who they love, etc. I personally understood better why some people might "lie"—conceal, not disclose, or cover up—their gender identity or sexual preference. It is risky to disclose. There is often a price to pay, and, at times, that price is very high, and very unjust.

Near the end of the book, Bornstein (2012) urges her daughter and readers to "Do whatever it takes to make your life worth living" (p. 252). This quote summarizes not only Bornstein's (2012) life, but also, her philosophy of living and her thesis. I think that her honest account of who she is, and how she came to figure out who she is, is inspiring in a way that extends far beyond people who are wrestling with what it means to be transgender or what it is like to struggle with gender identity and transitioning. It is very relatable.

Following this paper is the cover of the book and a photograph of Bornstein herself.



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