

A Queer and Pleasant Danger: a memoir by Kate Bornstein

Abstract: Lisa Newman reviews the new autobiography, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* by transgender artist, writer, and activist, Kate Bornstein. The memoir gives an account of Bornstein's unusual journey from her beginnings as a young Jewish boy, to being promoted to first-mate to L. Ron Hubbard in Scientology, to becoming a transgendered performance artist; or in her words 'the girl she is today'. Brief references and descriptions of Bornstein's other novels are included, giving an overview of her literary body of work.

URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvqiXqPHj8w>

Kate Bornstein: *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* (Beacon Press)

Though performance artist, author, and transgender activist, Kate Bornstein, is still very much alive, she is arguably destined for secular canonization when the inevitable happens. Her groundbreaking book, *Gender Outlaw*, first published in 1994, extended the performativity of gender far past Judith Butler and the binary cultural constructs of 'man' and 'woman' by proposing the eradication of gender's boundaries and inscriptions altogether. Using an accessible language of humour and wit, rather than coded medical or psychiatric jargon, Bornstein has illuminated alternatives to gender normativity for not only multitudes of transgendered and transexual people, but for anyone unsatisfied with the ascribed limitations of their gender.

Through generous accounts of her own experiences with sexuality, identity, religion, and the transformation of her own body in her writing and public performances, Bornstein promotes the empowerment of one's 'Otherness', rather than an acceptance of marginalization. Over the last decade, she has played an active role in suicide prevention for queer youth, as part of Dan Savage's 'It Get's Better' project. In her 2006 help book, *Hello, Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws*, she proposes 'identity suicide', over the death of the body; unquestionably giving second, third, or ninth invaluable new lives to countless young people struggling to find solid ground in an often complicated and harsh world. Her sainthood could be based on the evidence of these 'miracles' alone, along with her offer to help those battling moral dilemmas in their fight for acceptance and happiness by "doing time in hell" on their behalf. (2006: 96) However, she still has much to do on this plane of existence before journeying below, as evidenced in her latest tome.

Bornstein's 2012 memoir, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger*, gives a quick, yet accurate, summary in its subheading: *The True Story of a nice Jewish Body who joins the Church of Scientology and leaves Twelve Years later to Become the Lovely Lady she is today*. The story is, of course, considerably more complex. While the literary structure of autobiography is used, Bornstein's life appears multiple; quantum, even. Her simultaneous identities, genders, and even fashion choices within her roles as: Jewish son, university student and thespian, cadet and first-mate to L. Ron Hubbard in the Church of Scientology, husband and father, post-operative transexual, performance artist and writer, S/M enthusiast, and 'gender outlaw' seem to be more than what could logically be contained in one body, let alone articulated into a linear, and very entertaining, autobiography.

The homing beacon within this story - this life - is Bornstein's purposeful writing to her daughter, Jessica, whom she has not been able to contact since leaving the Church of Scientology in the early 1980s. Throughout the memoir, Bornstein often addresses the reader as Jessica directly, offering her words of comfort, of clarity, of love and longing,

along with the hope that this account of her absent father will somehow reach her through the strict censors and safeguards of the Church.

Bornstein was, and continues to be, marked as an 'SP' or 'Suppressive Person' after she chose excommunication over reprogramming, following her inadvertent involvement in a breach of security in 1982. Her additional status of being transexual and lesbian has only inflamed her ostracism and the authorization of Church members to insult, harass, or even inflict violence on her, as recounted in several accounts of unpleasant and threatening encounters over three decades. Paradoxically, her refusal to adhere to a consistent gender or normative sexual identity, as well as making controversial statements against 'women-only' spaces as needing to be clear on what 'woman' *is* in order to be exclusive, has generated additional ire from many lesbians and transexuals during the mid-1990s. To add to this complexity, Bornstein's identity politics became further complicated when her partner, Catherine, began transitioning from female-to-male to become David. This led, as one might imagine, to some unusual levels of introspection. As Bornstein recalls: "I was now a lesbian with a boyfriend, but I *wasn't* a real lesbian and he *wasn't* a real boy – so did that make us a heterosexual couple the other way round? Don't talk to me about paradox."

The majority of the memoir is devoted to guiding the reader through a series of twists and turns of key moments of self-discovery and explorations of love. Notably, this includes Bornstein's retelling of finding refuge and sexual awakening in an S/M menage-à-trois as slave to lesbian couple, Sailor and Lula (derivatives of the Barry Gifford literary characters) in Seattle, Washington. The complexities of the emotional and physical elements of this relationship, and their healing effects on Kate's identity and psyche, are unravelled expertly and compassionately in her narrative, with an additional playful warning for sensitive readers to skip ahead. Subplots of family dramas, the death of Kate's parents, first publications and performances, guest spots on television talk shows, and a diagnosis of a slow-moving leukemia give a further depth, richness, and introspection that, at times, transcends the retelling of a life to that of a heartfelt confession; ending with a final, bittersweet missive to Jessica in the epilogue.

Although *Queer and Pleasant Danger* is not directed specifically to an academic audience, it has much to offer to those exploring more progressive areas of post-modern gender studies, performance and theatre practices, as well as the post-human body in art and technology (also see Bornstein's *Nearly Roadkill: An Infobahn Erotic Adventure* (1996)). Bornstein's open and honest accounts of identity shifts, body politics, and gender fluidity address questions raised across the humanities. More importantly, she teaches by example that there are many ways to live and love within a single body, and reincarnation is always a viable option over stagnation and normativity.

Bornstein, Kate (2006) *Hello Cruel World*. Seven Stories Press: New York and London

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