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MEDIA REVIEWS

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MEDIA REVIEWS

Eric Aoki, *Media Reviews Editor*



TRANSGENDER EMERGENCE: THERAPEUTIC GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH GENDER-VARIANT PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES. Arlene I. Lev. *New York: Haworth Clinical Practice Press, 2004.*

A culmination of clinical social worker Arlene Istar Lev's life work to date, *Transgender Emergence*¹ is a definitive work and invaluable resource not only for mental health practitioners but also for professional providers of many other disciplines, (e.g., medicine, nursing, law, public policy, community services, and theology) students, researchers and educators as well as the client population itself, i.e., gender-variant and trans-identified individuals, their partners and family members.

Lev's work substantially exemplifies the goals and purposes of the *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* insofar as she focuses on the transgender-emerging couple or family as a social system, examining the developmental stages for partners/family members, and the resultant diversity of these relationships and family structures. Additionally, the author addresses such issues as parent-child relations, relationship issues, disclosure, and couple and family therapy as they specifically impact on gender-variance, gender dysphoria, transsexualism and transgenderism.

A welcome departure from the mainstay of traditional clinical research in this subject area ("Gender Identity Disorder" [sic]), the core value and singular best practice of Lev's work is her de-pathologizing

of gender variance (and reframing such non-binary identification and behaviour as gender diversity) and transgenderism, and her attendant compassionate treatment of gender-variant and trans-identified people and their loved ones. This intervention of normalizing and validating is also effectively applied to the parents of gender-variant and trans-identified children, who often harbor feelings of guilt of somehow being responsible for producing their abnormal or deviant child as often suggested in the clinical literature.

Lev's gender-affirming treatment approach is not surprising given that the author is herself lesbian-identified and, thus, is no stranger to homophobia in both her personal and professional life. Indeed, her lived experience as a member of a still-persecuted minority group sensitizes her to the prevalent societal transphobia faced by many of her clients, with its secondary impact on partners and family members who are often condemned as guilty by association.

The comprehensive scope of *Transgender Emergence* is breathtaking in its diverse subject matter, even including foci on bi-gender and intersex people. A scholarly, well-researched work, Lev's book includes extensive case examples and citations from the literature, a history of medical science and gender variance, the de-construction of sex and gender, an examination of the essentialist construction of etiological theories, a critique of the power of psychiatric diagnoses, and a substantial section on treatment issues.

Specifically, these treatment issues and interventions include narrative therapy, the developmental process of the transperson, the developmental stages for family members, working with gender-variant/transgender children and youth, and the treatment of intersex individuals.

Lev's "Model of Family Emergence Stages" is a useful tool for clinicians working with families with gender-variant or trans-identified children insofar as it outlines the four developmental stages of the transformational process of the family, which is, in itself, undergoing a transition similar to the gender transition of the transperson: Stage One: Discovery and Disclosure, Stage Two: Turmoil, Stage Three: Negotiation, Stage Four: Finding Balance.

Transgender Emergence provides sound clinical guidelines to effectively support gender-variant persons, transpeople and their loved ones. Lev's best practices draw largely upon the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association's "Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders" (Meyer et al., 2001), which are continuously in-

formed by her own clinical practice and innovative treatment interventions.

As a value-added bonus, Lev offers a wealth of resources to readers new to this field, including a brief compendium of some common intersex conditions, an instructive guide for clinicians around writing letters of recommendation for hormone therapy, and a glossary of selected terms pertaining to gender identity and sexual orientation.

I highly recommend this resource to every care provider or support professional who works with this population, including but not restricted to gender specialists, child/adolescent and adult psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, couple counselors, family therapists and spiritual counselors. I further urge the inclusion of this book in the library and curriculum reading list of every educational institution that trains health care, behavioral science, social work, law, political science and theology students.

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NOTE

1. Transgender Emergence has won the APA Division 44 Distinguished Book Award for 2004.

REFERENCE

Meyer, W., III (Chairperson), Bockting, W., Cohen-Kettenis, P., Coleman, E., DiCeglie, D., Devor, H., Gooren, L., Hage, J., Kirk, S., Kuiper, B., Laub, D., Lawrence, A., Menard, Y., Patton, J., Schaefer, L., Webb, A., Wheeler, C. (2001). *The standards of care for gender identity disorders (6th version)*. Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA). Retrieved from <http://www.hbigda.org/Documents2/socv6.pdf>.

BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN. (2005). *This Is That Productions*. Screenplay adapted by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana from a short story of the same title by E. Annie Proulx. Directed by Ang Lee. Starring Jake Gyllenhaal (Jack Twist), Heath Ledger (Ennis Del Mar), Anne Hathaway (Lureen), Randy Quaid (Joe Aguirre), and Michelle Williams (Alma). Rated R (for sexuality, nudity, language and some violence).

They say the sign of a really good movie is you can't stop thinking about it. *Brokeback Mountain*, therefore, deserves all the accolades it is receiving. Ennis and Jack stay with you, the way cool mountain air clings to you for days after returning to the big city. Ennis and Jack have become a kind of symbol of the frustration of human love—in the great expanse of the American wilderness, these repressed, trapped cowboys live on the edges of a burdened and strained horror, knowing that all we hold dear in our lives is so shockingly fragile.

I confess, although this movie has haunted me for days, I found it rather slow-moving. My partner, who would likely enjoy the life of cowboy rancher far more than I, was captivated by the dialectic of casual tranquility and mounting tension. I can't get these men out of my mind—their passion, their silence, their fate. Until I suddenly realize that this is an old familiar story: a modern cowboy remake of *Children's Hour* and *Torch Song Trilogy*—another gay story with a dead hero at the ending.

Sadly, this is often the final chapter in our stories, especially in Wyoming but also (still) in Greenwich Village; in the counterculture sixties; and well into this next century—tire irons and gangs of restless boys. This has been the fate of our people so how can we not watch the screen with wide-eyed horror, a reoccurring dream of frozen terror when you want to scream but your throat is constricted. Americans are waking up suddenly, in a sweat, witnessing our collective nightmare. What is it that heterosexual audiences, not just in the United States but around the world, are finding so compelling about this story?

Brokeback Mountain is a rare film that is as deep and riveting as the literary short story on which it is based. Ennis and Jack are our kin—intimate reflections of all of our fears of coming out. We remember what it was like on *that* mountain and which of us queers has not turned away from same-sex love at some point, sure that the path ahead was too painful, too dangerous, too uncharted? Many of us also remember what it was like when we finally arrived in the big city, found gay communities,

and suddenly we moved into our bodies, into the fullness of our beings—who could not want that for Ennis and Jack?

A quick Google search will reveal that many have written more positive AU (alternative universe) renditions of the story. In my personal favorite, Ennis and Jack relocate to Vermont and take up farming. I will admit it: I want a happier ending for Ennis and Jack. Not “they lived happily ever after,” but something more satisfying than another dead queer or, perhaps even worse, another lonely gay man living his life in a wilderness with memories he can share with no one—including his children.

Ennis and Jack are, of course, parents. Fathers. Ennis and Jack, for better or worse, are another face of gay fatherhood in this country. Ennis was, I thought, a “good” dad given the time and place, and the nature of fatherhood among “real” men. Despite poverty and a taciturn nature, he picked up his babies with familiarity and put up with their screaming with as much gentleness as any harried, exhausted parent. He prioritized his children to Jack’s disappointment and confusion in a way few fathers really do. He loved his girls even if he wasn’t always sure what to actually do with them. These children would likely live their whole lives never knowing about their father’s greatest love unless, of course, Alma tells them one day in a moment of mother-daughter intimacy. Let us not forget that Ennis, who undoubtedly made many decisions based in fear, also made decisions he thought were best for this children.

Somewhere in Texas there is a young man whose father died in a bizarre accident which no one really talks much about. For that matter, no one talks much about his father at all, and over time his memories have grown dim. But sometimes he looks at his picture, a handsome man with a sparkle in his eyes who loved the rodeo. And inside something feels a bit empty. Perhaps he reads newspaper articles that condemn the fate of children raised by only their mothers to restlessness and lack of direction and thinks this is his legacy because of his father’s accident. Does he look at his father’s deep and sad eyes and ever wonder about his father’s life, or his death? Does he skip over newspaper articles on hate crimes and bias-related violence never thinking that he too has been a victim?

In this age of queer parenting, let us not forget that far too many gay parents live lives more like Ennis and Jack than Rosie and Kelly. And far too many children have inherited the legacy of silence and shame that homophobia produces leaving adults with broken fathers they

never really had a chance to know—rugged men with tender gay hearts and that cannot speak of the things that matter most.

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