

JAN MORRIS

I was three or perhaps four years old
when I realized that I had been born
into the wrong body, and should really
be a girl. I remember the moment well,
and it is the earliest memory of my life.

CONUNDRUM

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

Conundrum

Jan Morris

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Conundrum

Jan Morris

Conundrum Jan Morris

The great travel writer Jan Morris was born James Morris. James Morris distinguished himself in the British military, became a successful and physically daring reporter, climbed mountains, crossed deserts, and established a reputation as a historian of the British empire. He was happily married, with several children. To all appearances, he was not only a man, but a man's man.

Except that appearances, as James Morris had known from early childhood, can be deeply misleading. James Morris had known all his conscious life that at heart he was a woman.

Conundrum , one of the earliest books to discuss transsexuality with honesty and without prurience, tells the story of James Morris's hidden life and how he decided to bring it into the open, as he resolved first on a hormone treatment and, second, on risky experimental surgery that would turn him into the woman that he truly was.

Conundrum Details

Date : Published May 16th 2006 by NYRB Classics (first published 1974)

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Author : Jan Morris

Format : Paperback 176 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Gender, Gltb, Queer, Lgbt

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From Reader Review Conundrum for online ebook

Rachel says

The book as a whole is primarily of interest for historical reasons, and the second half is largely a desperate attempt to reassure a patriarchal society that her transition was no threat to it.

That's an understandable response to the pressures Ms. Morris must have been under in her time and place, but her description of her life post-transition is by turns tedious and excruciating to read now, and it was poorly timed in its day — cisgender feminists spent the rest of the seventies quoting Ms. Morris's autobiography any time they needed to bludgeon trans women for existing, and the image of trans women as inherently reactionary and anti-feminist lives on long after the people who chose Ms. Morris as representative of every trans woman have died or faded from relevance.

Having said that, this book is a fascinating landmark in trans literature, the first modern entry in the (now overstuffed and cliche) genre of trans autobiography. And it's easy to see why Ms. Morris has had such a successful career as a travel writer: every setting in the book is described in such loving detail that it's easy to slip into seeing the world around her exactly as she saw it. I came for the historical interest, but this book made me want to read more of her prose on its own merits — though I might prefer a book whose gender politics are less painfully dated.

Linda says

I have wanted to read this book since it came out in 1974. Morris, a journalist and travel writer of the kind that Chatwin and Theroux are known for, tells us about life as a transgender. Not only that but the book tells us about the traveling that he did while figuring out how to cope with this strangely crossed life. He, is now a she-- for many years now. Morris' family of children and former wife are still enfolded within the circle of her life and she writes on.

Perkimom says

I found this a tedious read, more about the author's travels than in-depth thoughts and feelings about the issue of her transgender issues and life. I was expecting to be more educated and I wasn't even really entertained. Brave soul but not my favorite book by any means.

Dorothy Bennett says

For anyone wanting to understand what life is like for transsexuals, CONUNDRUM by Jan Morris is a must-along with the film THE DANISH GIRL and the book SHE'S NOT THERE: A LIFE IN TWO GENDERS by Jennifer Finney Boylan. CONUNDRUM is a classic, published in the early '70s, when articles, books, and movies about human beings with gender conflicts were not common nor widely available. Morris, who was successful in every sense of the word as James Morris, always felt that inside he was a woman.

Understanding that and doing something about it consumed the first half of his life; living as Jan Morris made up the second half. The book covers the before, the process of change, and the after; in addition, Morris takes a step back and talks about men and women in a broader sense--who they are, how they behave, and how they are treated in society (or were at the time of writing). Things change, and Morris recognized that fact in an Introduction written for the 2002 edition. I found the book very informative and interesting. If I have any problem with it, it is that the language is more formal, intellectual (sending me to the dictionary quite often), maybe as a result of the fact that Morris is Welsh-English and when the book was written. Personally, I prefer Boylan's account, which touched me more, but perhaps that is the time written and the fact that Boylan is American, uses words I am more familiar with, and touched more upon the emotional effects of his/her struggle on wife, family, and friends. Both books are worth the time to read.

J David says

Conundrum by Jan Morris is a fascinating story of how James Morris became Jan Morris. James since he was four years old felt he was a girl yet he grew up as a male and served in the British Armed Services. He was a writer of note, married, had five children, looked male but knew that he was really female. At around age 45 he went to Casablanca for a sex change operation that was successful and lived successfully as a woman. It is interesting to see how she perceives the way she is treated differently as a woman by society than as a man. Whether that is accurate or only her perception is not easy to say. The book is well written. She is accomplished writer and wrote a trilogy on the Victorian Empire. The first two volumes written as a man and the final volume as a woman. This is a sensitive book, touching and well worth reading.

Jordan says

I had to read this book for my Gay and Lesbian English Class, and it isn't a book that I would have naturally picked up. However I really was taken aback how much I enjoyed reading about the transition the writer made from James to Jane. How it felt to be a man in Wales for 45 years and the to appear back in same village that narrator grew up and was suddenly a woman. I was very much fascinated with the parallels between being a man in society, and that of being a woman in society. It really is a sweet story, and a very easy read. Many I think you would enjoy this book you should put it on your pile to read.

Miguel says

A couple years ago I read one of the best travel books I know: Venice, by Jan Morris, who is considered one of the best British writers of today, with a body of work that emphasizes the travelogues, but that includes fiction, history , memories and non-fiction in general.

Venice is a majestic book, which made me feel naturally curious about its author. At the time it was published in Portugal an article in a portuguese newspaper aroused my curiosity: I found out that Morris was a transsexual having a sex change in the early 70s, and that part of her work, including Venice, has been published with her previous male name, James. It was still as James Morris that she participated in the British expedition that first climbed the Everest.

The interest in learning more about the author, and the precedent of the magnificent writing of Venice, brought me to *Conundrum*, a volume of memoirs dedicated to the half-life that Jan Morris lived with the conviction that her sex was wrong in relation to the gender she felt that she belonged to, and the process that led her to correct this error, culminating with a stay in a clinic in Casablanca. The book was first published in 1974, and this reissue just updated with a new preface by the author.

The writing is excellent. Morris' English (Venice I had read in translation) is lush, with a rich vocabulary, the syntax sophisticated simplicity is almost musical. The book is organized into short chapters, in which the tone, although varying between memories more reflective and more factual account, it is always very stylish and fun, combining an English way of being affluent to a view of life from those who already knew its most secret and extravagant corners.

Jan Morris's vision is somewhat dated, especially in how confined by gender stereotypes, and how these stereotypes inform her journey through the gender streaming. But it is important to remember that this book is forty years old, and since the time it was written, the way how gender overcame the most simplistic dichotomy male-female, is probably the greatest revolution of our time. Thus, it is not very reasonable to accuse Morris of a pre-revolutionary vision when, somehow, we have to thank her for having been, like many others, at the genesis of this revolution.

Conundrum means enigma. The leitmotif of this admirable, deep, funny and intense book is not so much the search for an answer to the riddle, but rather the process of learning how to live with it.

sevdah says

Jan Morris is a very good writer and we're just lucky she decided to also write about her transition as a transgender woman. It's a deeply personal memoir of someone who ultimately fought for her right to be happy as herself, and carry on loving life on her own terms. Especially interesting here were the pages describing how people's attitudes changed with her gender - how she was thought to be a good professional when passing as a male, and then (in her 40s) started being a slightly silly "good girl". (Her own ideas about what she could or could not be were deeply influenced by that, of course, and let's not forget the book was written more than 40 years ago; for example she mentioned how she never pursued a career in politics because it seemed too "manly", or stated that women can't really feel the satisfaction of climbing Everest.) It's a good book with a fair few pages on travelling and adventure, but mostly it's about people interested in gender and identity.

Red says

Understanding my identity as a transwoman came about for me in the late 2000's, and thus most of what I read and learned from was on the internet and not set down in ink and binding. Of the trans memoirs I've held in my hands, this ties with Jamison Green's *Becoming a Visible Man* as my favorite. Whereas Mr. Green's is a more political, academic and recent work, and is imminently more suited as inspiration and fodder for the kinds of public speaking work I've been fortunate to engage in, it is also a work that better helps me understand who I am now, as opposed to who I was for those first 20-or-so years.

Who I was for my first 20-or-so years was frightened, confused. I had no terminology, no ability to use

rationality to heal myself, no notion of the trans movement or even the belief that anyone existed with my affliction other than poor me. I would not meet a person who self-identified as trans, or even hear the word "transgender," until I was in college. So in those bright brief moments where I was not hating myself and permitted my mind to envision my desires, what did I see? I saw a beautiful red-haired woman who held me from behind, eyes closed, her chin on my shoulder. She would tell me that it was okay, that she and I would meet one day. Sometimes, she had wings.

Author Jan Morris, transitioning as she did in the 60's and 70's, did not have the internet, or books, or movement. She had instead her mind, her desire, and a psycho-spiritual flare for processing the universe that was her omnipresent guide. It is her very lovely brain that means oh so much to me. Because I will never be that person who did not know the word "trans" again. I will never be that scared girl who stayed alive because of the images and visions her brain gave her to keep her going. To make her believe in...in anything, anything at all. Anything that wasn't you were born, you will die, and always in between shall remain unfulfilled.

This book is wise and insightful, filled with words by an old soul, and is a valuable text because it isn't born out of our current debates between whether trans is real or not, whether a minority's rights are worth affirming or not, whether we should call ourselves this word or that word. While there are older stories of gender variance than this, this for me is my ur-trans narrative. A pre-everything story that is as different from our trans discussion now as a shaman's tale over bonfire is from a vlog. It is an important chapter in a history that has too few entries and long-form memoirists whose works were put down before the 80's.

Do give this beautiful work the time of day. It is short, as filling as a big dinner, and as warm as a cuddle.

P.S. My undying thanks to Wilton Barnhardt for referring me to this work many years ago. I needed it, then as now.

P.P.S. Kim Fu's recent fiction work, *For Today I Am a Boy*, is likewise recommended if you enjoy trans-related books in this vein. And if you enjoyed this or Mr. Green's book, I would also recommend you check out *Letters for My Brothers: Transitional Wisdom in Retrospect*.

Hilary G says

Ex Bookworm group review:

Yesterday, I watched a documentary about Freddie Mercury, and it struck me how some people's lives are so much more extraordinary than the lives of most of us. Such people do more, see more, say more, they make news, they are capable of influencing people in their thousands. This, I thought, is what makes celebrities (though, as a society, I think we have lost the plot about who is and is not a celebrity) so exciting that others want to know every detail of their lives. Their lives are interesting, whereas ours may be more humdrum and ordinary. Yet there are other people, not widely known as celebrities, who have lived extraordinary lives that we would never know about unless they themselves choose to tell us. Jan Morris is such a person, unless she is, in fact, very famous, and you have all heard of her. I heard of her by chance, listening to the radio on a day and at a time I don't normally listen to the radio. I can't even remember what was said, not very much, but the book was mentioned and I decided to follow it up. By the time I remembered, I could not remember the name of the book, but I remembered enough to find it, and it sounded interesting enough for us to read

here. It was a short book (thank goodness) but I found it packed with interest, and I hope you did too. Even as a (mere) man, Morris had a life that was full of excitement, travelling all over the world at a time when this was only common for soldiers, civil servants and the idle rich. Morris the man was a soldier and subsequently a journalist and travel writer, and was the Times Special Correspondent accompanying the team led by Sir Edmund Hillary in the successful conquest of Everest in 1953. Morris the man married and fathered 5 children. Yet, despite all this apparent proof of his masculinity, Morris felt always that he should have been a woman and took all the necessary steps, including surgery, to become one. Conundrum is the history of this journey.

I can't pretend to understand transexualism (which is defined in Wikipedia simply as "a condition in which a person identifies with a physical sex different from the one with which they were born,") but Conundrum leaves me in no doubt that it is a real issue. Morris was fortunate to be able to solve the conundrum at a time when there was much less understanding of the issues than there is now and far fewer sources of help, but even for her, it is a harrowing journey, involving going to Casablanca for surgery in a clinic with its floors that were "less than scrupulously clean" and without hot water in the hand basins. Given details like this, how can one doubt that this was an imperative and not a whim?

Morris is a very well educated and widely-read person and, as such, her writing can make you feel inferior at times, which is irritating. "I agree with Goethe," she says at the end of one chapter. "Well, bully for you!" say I. Yet, I mostly delighted in the fine writing. I could immediately picture "a retired brigadier of lascivious tendencies and his empoored wife," and surely only a writer could describe the satisfaction derived from a sex change operation as being "like a sentence which, defying its own subordinate clauses, reaches a classical confusion in the end". I loved the story about warthogs being beautiful to each other (there is hope for us all).

As well as being a journalist and travel writer, Morris is also a historian, and in many respects this book is a piece of history. Although the book was not written until 1974, she was already writing about a time that had passed into history and attitudes that would soon be consigned to the scrapheap. I smiled at her statement that she "would not want to be ruled by Africans" and wondered what she makes of Barack Obama (how amazing that only 7 years after 9/11, many Americans are seriously contemplating electing someone with the middle name of Hussein, how fast history rolls on). Social attitudes are not inherent, but learnt and Morris had to learn them at the age of 46. It is a pity though that she accepted attitudes to women with such equanimity, even claiming them to be advantageous. Even though that irked me a bit (surely she was too intelligent to accept not having her opinions listened to and being treated as an inferior?) I had to smile at one of them: "I did not particularly want to be good at reversing cars..." and will remember it next time anyone mentions women drivers and parking.

The book was an extraordinarily personal account of something many people might choose not to write (or read?) about, but its unrelentingly narrow point of view (Morris's) left many unanswered questions in my mind. Did Elizabeth really not mind the father of her children becoming a woman? Did those children really adapt so easily to their dad becoming a second mum?

I seem to have written quite a lot about a very small book, but to me that is the sign of a good book. I enjoyed the writing (with the exception of the Goethe-was-my-best-friend bits), I learnt a lot and I was left wanting to know more.

Jose says

Descubrí a la autora y a esta obra en concreto a través de un artículo de eldiario.es sobre obras que debían entenderse como referente en la evolución de la teoría feminista y la verdad que ha sido una grata sorpresa.

Dicha obra, escrita como ensayo autobiográfico, relata la etapa de transición de hombre a mujer de la escritora en un momento en el que la transexualidad, si bien empezaba a ser dotada de reconocimiento, era todavía una cuestión para la que había cualquier cosa menos un protocolo determinado o unas normas escritas en torno a cómo actuar. Quizá solo por ello esta obra debe ser puesta en valor, y probablemente se trate de uno de los testimonios más clarificadores por su gran calidad en la narración y por la forma de abordar todo el relato de forma sencilla a pesar de la complejidad del mismo.

A lo largo de toda la obra existen pasajes de gran belleza literaria, y aunque obviamente algunas opiniones o valoraciones puedan haber quedado desfasadas, es interesante ver como adelantó alguno de los aspectos clave de la concepción en torno al género en el s. XXI, donde la identidad masculina-femenina parece ir difuminándose poco a poco.

En definitiva, una obra básica para tener un preconceptualización histórica en torno a la cuestión de la identidad de género.

Aubrey says

3.5/5

*It had occurred to me that perhaps mine was a perfectly normal condition, and that **every** boy wished to become a girl. It seemed a logical enough aspiration, if Woman was so elevated and admirable a being as history, religion, and good manners combined to assure us.*

In the United States, there was a ruling within the past year that allowed trans people to join the military. This dubious success characterizes this book completely: those who are transgender are welcomed with open arms so long as they not only conform as much as possible to the white/well off/nonthreatening species of non-cis, but enforce the eradication of all those brown and/or insane and/or gender annihilating types who may fall under the purview of trans but do not fit within the military industrial complex. This is not to say that Jan Morris does not succeed beautifully on an individual level when it comes to her journey through the life of her self, but that her story could have done well enough sticking to her own sensibilities rather than passing judgment on others. It explains why there are a number of quotes that are wonderfully conducive to the rights of trans people of every intersecting demographic, and yet within the context of the work's entirety are constrained to a very specific type with which Morris attempts to win the public over via self-neutralization. As such, when she speaks of finding solidarity with others at a surgical clinic in Casablanca, it is unfortunate that I can probably make a very accurate guess as to the skin color and cultural norms of the majority of those empathized with.

Let's get one thing straight: this is a gorgeous piece of writing, both for how much complexity and depth it can pack into less than 200 pages as well as its prose and more macro textual constructions. That's not the issue here. What is is how many people defend their right to engage with everything on the most uncritical, and thus the most calcified and bigotry-reinforcing, perspective possible, and how that interacts with those who represent the "good" parts of a regularly maligned community. Let's say Caitlyn Jenner, a more modern

example than Jan Morris, also wrote a memoir of her life, focusing on the trans aspect of her identity. First you get the people who want her dead, a judgment highly encouraged in a country where 99% of its constituents legalize the civilian execution of trans people via the trans panic defense. Then, you get the wafflers who will go with whichever flow will give them the most economic security. Finally, you get those so obsessed with pat themselves on the back for a higher morality that they'll praise the work to the skies without questioning the other aspects that go into a trans identity such as religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic stability. I don't mention those in true solidarity because they take up such a small percentage of the population. For example, the fact that trans people are conditioned to feel the need to "pass" is nothing but a bunch of aesthetic hogwash resulting from cis people valuing their comfort zones of socialized constructs over respecting others. When one considers the history of transphobia in the LGBTQIA movement up until the present day, there's little guarantee that the non-queer populace will be much better.

So. Should you read this? Sure, if you critically engage with the colonial/ableist/dichotomous edifices rearing their heads amidst an otherwise admirably heartfelt engagement with the personal is the political is the personal. The equating of a European city to the entirety of an African continent doesn't help trans people in Uganda, or Morocco, or the Democratic Republic of Congo. If you want to argue that the past excused this sort of writing, you should have read the book and offered your static opinions in 1974 when it was first published, not drag the desiccated corpse of faux normalization into 2016. 2017's already shaping up into a bitter repeat of what many a liberal like to say died as the result of the Civil Rights Movement, or Stonewall, or World War II, so don't waste your energy defending icons. There are plenty of living and breathing people who don't fit into the boxes prescribed by this book who have earned your solidarity many times over. Let's work with them so that they may one day write their own books and complicate the accepted picture of trans accordingly, shall we?

To me gender is not physical at all, but is altogether insubstantial. It is soul, perhaps, it is talent, it is taste, it is environment, it is how one feels, it is light and shade, it is inner music, it is a spring in one's step or an exchange of glances, it is more truly life and love than any combination of genitals, ovaries, and hormones. It is the essentialness of oneself, the psyche, the fragment of unity.

Kate says

Jan Morris is an author and was a foreign correspondent, who was part of the famed boy's choir at Oxford and where he returned for his education. He served in the second world war, married, had children who he adored, and in 1970 he wrote about his life, as a man and transsexual who eventually crossed that boundary with surgery that allowed her to claim her gender.

This was written in 1970 when most people had little understanding of transsexuals. I am sure this book had far more impact in the seventies. It is hard to judge it from the perspective of the 2017 world we find ourselves in. Also Jan was born to a class system that most American audiences would not easily identify with, a class of English who was more accepting of the eccentricities of members of its own class: above the moralizing of the working and middleclass of that time.

It is an interesting memoir more than for the conundrum, but as a window to a time and place in British history, the sense of male prerogative and how easily females were dismissed with the exception of strong women who interfaced with educated men of their class.

It is a fast read for anyone familiar with the upper class British experience and all of their classical and literary references. I can imagine that others would totally get lost in the weightiness of the dialog....but an

interesting perspective.

Katie says

I knew Jan Morris was trans; what I did not know, until a lovely friend of mine lent me this book, was that she'd written about that experience. But this is indeed a memoir about her trans journey, and her life around that, and what it meant to her as a child of the 1930s and 40s. And it's really lovely.

Morris' prose always has this...I want to say delicate quality, but it's more robust than that. She doesn't mince words and she's not over effusive or purple. She is, however, very evocative. That stands her in good stead to talk about such a huge and shifting thing as gender and sex. It's not simple, and Morris doesn't let you think that it is. But she doesn't over-complicate either. It's exactly as simple and confusing as taking a breath.

It's a lovely book, and all Morris' brains and heart and life seemed to be shining out of it as I read it. Thoroughly recommended.

Matt says

I've read and loved enough of Jan Morris' books that it seemed past time to put her life into perspective. This book seemed so personal that I actually chose to go with the audiobook, and I'm glad I did. I'll likely go back and read it in paper at some point in the next couple of years, but as a first experience listening to the story of Morris' experience emphasized the personal feel.

Morris' new introduction is quite open about the fact that a lot of her ideas and terminology are now outdated, such that she finds it embarrassing to revisit. I similarly found parts of it a little awkward and dated, but Morris is at her best when she's talking not about how she was trying to understand things, but about her own experience and how she felt and feels about things. That personal aspect of her story is eloquent and persuasive and I think will help this book remain a valuable experience for a long time.

Stephanie says

Very difficult. I very much enjoyed the writing style and reading about one individual's experience (particularly a non-contemporary experience) but I found this very challenging to balance against the the upper (middle) class, imperialist and (on occasion) racist passages. I want to say that the writer is a product of her time and personal history (as are we all), that her generation was more steeped in the gender binary and traditional roles... And all this would be true. So, in that sense and given the fact that it is very much a personal account, it was worthwhile reading. My disappointment was in unearthing views that were discomfiting and which the author does not appear to have challenged in herself.

Tania says

Dull, too much travel writing for me. Very dated in its discussions of women roles in society, and

intriguingly but disappointingly something which Jan seems accepting of. Valuable from historical perspective.

Maggie Holmes says

I had heard of Jan/James Morris several years ago so I looked up his memoir for our study of various types of life experiences. She is a very expressive writer and really makes you understand how she felt growing up, why she felt she was in the wrong body, and why she made the choices she did. Her comments about how life as a woman was different from life as a man were intriguing. Read this book to understand more about what a transsexual person is. There is more than just the flash of Caitlyn Jenner.

Telmo Fernandes says

Quase que arriscaria dizer que qualquer autobiografia de uma pessoa trans merece ser lida, nem que seja apenas pela pertinência (vital e urgente) da aproximação à experiência a que todas as pessoas cis são em boa medida poupadadas durante a sua vida: a batalha pela sobrevivência dentro do modelo convencional que articula sexo e género. Se somarmos a isso o facto de estarmos perante uma escritora de primeira leva, e uma coleção de viagens e histórias capaz de ladear com personagens de grandes romances de aventuras, ficamos com um livro decididamente recomendável. Deve ser lido com o mesmo olhar histórico em que foi escrito (nomeadamente no que se refere ao conhecimento e visibilidade, à época, das questões associadas à identidade de género), e se possível deve ser evitada a tradução portuguesa, que não soube respeitar a verdade da personagem ao optar por despachar a narração no masculino até à cirurgia genital, momento a partir do qual é 'autorizado' o uso do feminino (distinção que a versão original, em inglês, e por se tratar de um texto na primeira pessoa, não chega sequer a levantar).

James Hartley says

Second reading and just as impressive, if not more so, the second time. Very relevant, too, in these times of debates on gender and sexuality. Jan Morris, born James, knew she was a female trapped in a man's body from the age of three. It took her half a life to make the physical change and this book is about that process. It is fascinating to read so talented a writer on such a fascinating subject: Jan has lived as both a man and a woman and here she describes how that feels, the differences within and without.
A fascinating, valuable, impressive, honest book.
