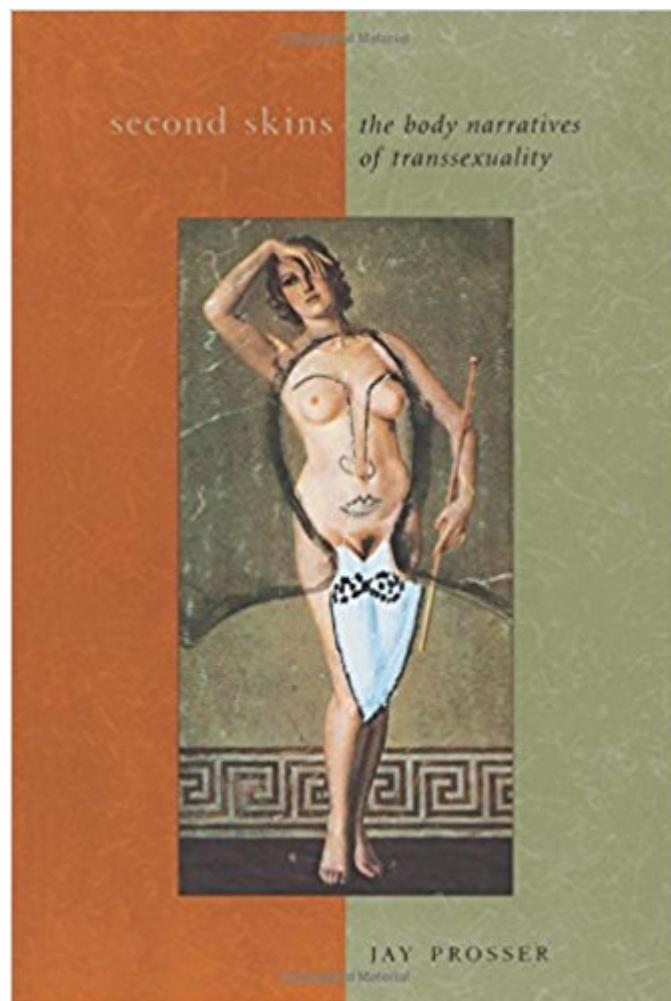


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Second Skins



Synopsis

Do we need bodies for sex? Is gender in the head or in the body? In *Second Skins* Jay Prosser reveals the powerful drive that leads men and women literally to shed their skins and--in flesh and head--to cross the boundary of sex. Telling their story is not merely an act that comes after the fact, it's a force of its own that makes it impossible to forget that stories of identity inhabit autobiographical bodies. In this stunning first extensive study of transsexual autobiography, Jay Prosser examines the exchanges between body and narrative that constitute the phenomenon of transsexuality. Showing how transsexuality's somatic transitions are spurred and enabled by the formal transitions of narrative, Prosser uncovers a narrative tradition for transsexual bodies. Sex change is a plot--and thus appropriately transsexuals make for adept and absorbing authors. In reading the transsexual plot through transsexuals' own recounting, Prosser not only gives us a new and more accurate rendition of transsexuality. His book suggests transsexuality, with its extraordinary conjunctions of body and narrative, as an identity story that transitions across the body/language divide that currently stalls poststructuralist thought. The form and approach of *Second Skins* works to cross other important and parallel divides. In addition to analyzing transsexual textual accounts, the book includes some 30 photographic portraits of transsexuals--poignant attempts by transsexuals to present themselves unmediated to the world except by the camera. And the author does not shy from exposing himself. Interjecting the personal into his theoretical discussion and close textual work throughout the book, Prosser reads and writes his own body, his purpose in that stylistic crossing to stake out transsexuality--and hence this very book--as his own body's narrative.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

..."Prosser brilliantly proposes conceiving the transsexual as experiencing an Imaginary phantomization of the missing sexual organs, perhaps accompanied by an agnosic [sic] relation to the birth organs. Together, these conditions combine to motivate the transsexual to seek sex reassignment surgery as a healing of what is indeed a condition of gender dysphoria....Prosser's second substantial contribution, in "Second Skins," is a critique of poststructuralist analyses of gender and transgender....Prosser's theorization of the role of narrative in transsexual self-fashioning, and his explication of a range of exemplary transsexual autobiographies are acute and illuminating.... "Second Skins" does difficult, important work in helping us to think transsexuality critically rather than judgmentally." -- Jody Norton, Eastern Michigan University, "Lesbian and Gay Studies Newsletter"

Examining the powerful drive that leads men and women literally to shed their skins *gubarandâ* •in mind and bodyâ •to cross the boundary of sex, Prosser argues that sex change is, at best, a narrativeâ •thus transsexuals make for adept and absorbing authors.

Jay Prosser *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 270 pages (ISBN: 0-231-10934-2; hardcover) (ISBN: 0-231-10935-0; paperback) (Library of Congress call number: HQ77.9.P76 1998) Jay Prosser was born a female but as an adult lives as a man. The books discussed here were mostly written by radical feminists. Besides advocating the same opportunities for women as granted to men, Prosser also advocates the freedom to change sexÃ¢Â"or to present oneself as an intermediate sex between female and male. Thus, this book grew out of a personal and passionate involvement with the cause of sex-and-gender liberation. The background research for *Second Skins* was a reading of some 50 autobiographies of people who have changed from one sex to the otherÃ¢Â"and some important works of transsexual fiction. Jay Prosser is aware of the pressure to fabricate a standard transsexual story in order to convince the sex-change psychologists and surgeons. And later these stories are elaborated into full-blown autobiographies, but still with the purpose of justifying a sex-change. Narratives are very important to transsexuals, first because they must 'remember' always wanting to be the other sex from childhood. Prosser avoids exploring the psychological reasons for

wanting to change sex. And any discussion of the subjects' sexual orientations, sexual responses, & sexual relationship is mostly absent. Such an exploration might have revealed that most of the butch lesbians discussed in this book were trying to understand why they have sexual fantasies of themselves as male. Early imprinting of sex-scripts might have been a better explanation in many cases than 'transsexuality'. A major gap in the research behind this book is modern scientific sexology. The author does give an account of old-fashioned explanations and some Freud. Prosser traces the changing models of these variations of sex and gender: In the early 1900s, these people were called "inverts" meaning that they had "contrary sexual desires".

Jay Prosser's book (in addition to being uniquely insightful) occupies a unique place in the growing (trans)gender studies canon: it is the only one that engages seriously with the specificity of transsexual (as distinct from transgender) identification, and critically examines the points of critical divergence between the two (or the several, if you prefer). His readings of *The Well of Loneliness* and *Stone Butch Blues*, as well as the appended consideration of transsexual photographic self-portrait (which is as moving as it is insightful) are, quite simply, not to be missed. A must.

I am a trans person, not terribly educated in the formal sense, and I found it very accessible and innovative.

I had to read this book for a class at University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin, and I will never, ever recommend this... to anyone. Is he really trying to reach people? Or just other PhD peoples? Gimme a break.

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