

Book Review

Wondrous Transformations: A Maverick Physician, the Science of Hormones, and the Birth of the Transgender Revolution

Alison Li

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2024. 272 pp.

KEYWORDS: Transgender history; Biography; Endocrinology; Sexology; Weimar Germany; Transatlantic medicine.

Discussions of transgender medicine are increasingly common in both academia and popular culture. Quite a bit of the scholarly work being done is historical, and aims to resurrect and retell the stories of the (long) history of trans forms of subjecthood and domains of biomedicine, including the work of Jules Gill-Petersen and the works of Jacob Moses, Beans Velocci, and Elliot Marrow, to name a few.¹ In *Wondrous Transformations: A Maverick Physician, the Science of Hormones, and the Birth of the Transgender Revolution*, Alison Li adds to this space by contributing the first full-length biography of Dr. Harry Benjamin, an early figure in the institutionalization of transgender medicine.

In *Wondrous Transformations*, Li proceeds chronologically, covering (in successive chapters) Benjamin's childhood and early life in 1800s Germany, his eventual move to the United States and efforts to establish himself, and his later engagement with trans healthcare. The story she tells does several things, including highlighting Benjamin's active engagement with forms of queeriness (through his friendship and relationship with Magnus Hirschfeld) and long-standing interest in endocrinology, prior to his explicit involvement with trans people. As this trajectory suggests, she also articulates and argues for a view of Benjamin that sees his involvement in trans medicine not as the radical act of a retiring doctor in his eighties, but instead as a natural point of progression from his existing work and interests. Interwoven with this, Li discusses both the structural and personal aspects of his decision-making, contextualizing his work and life in the environment within which he existed, while simultaneously demonstrating the way that his curiosity and comfort with "maverick" work primed him to take the role he did in early trans healthcare.

1 Jules Gill-Petersen, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

Writing biographical history is hard, for several reasons. The first, in common with any form of history but exacerbated by the limits of how individual lives are documented, is the problem of capturing the facts of what happened. By and large, with the exception of a couple of particularly glaring errors (such as the claim that Benjamin coined the term “gender dysphoria” as early as 1953 [p.160]), Li tackles this well, providing an illuminating and accurate retelling of Benjamin’s life. In doing this, Li is aided by (and to be applauded for) her willingness to interview figures involved in Benjamin’s life, including his “apprentice” Charles Ihlenfeld, rather than rely solely on archival sources as many writers have. The second challenge, of course, is balancing individual and structural understandings of how events came to occur, neither dismissing the impact of structural factors nor underappreciating the importance of personal actions and attitudes in instigating change. Once again, Li handles this balance adroitly, avoiding either dismissing or over-focusing on Benjamin as a person in charting the role he played in trans healthcare.

If there is a fly in the ointment, it is not so much the balance between structural and individual factors, but the attitude Li takes to Benjamin as a person — one that is perhaps slightly too sympathetic, segmenting off his occasional frustrations and relationship with eugenics in trailing asides. For an informed reader, the result is a book that occasionally frustrates in how simply it sometimes portrays a very complex man. We are told, for example, that “Benjamin listened to the voices of his patients with respect and sought to do what he could to help them,” which the historical record indeed, frequently reflects (p. 146). But what about when his idea of “help” overrode the idea of listening: when, for example, he decided to try and “cure” his trans patients by giving them anti-schizophrenia medication, while telling them it was estrogen?² Benjamin’s attitude is contrasted with that of other providers, where “patients were made to feel like exotic specimens” (p.166); how should a reader pair this understanding of Benjamin’s sympathy and care with a letter he wrote to Alfred Kinsey, saying that his early trans patients were “a damned nuisance most of the time. If they weren’t so interesting in many instances, I would be tempted to try and get rid of them”?³ Benjamin’s life and attitude was complex, and worthy of exploration that confronts that complexity; at times, it feels *Wondrous Transformations* shies away from doing so.

That being said, a biography of Benjamin’s life has been needed for some time and Li’s book is — by and large — a good one. It is likely to be of interest to historians of trans medicine, and — through the connections it draws between Benjamin’s life and developments in Weimar-era Germany — pairs nicely with recent scholarship focused on the history (and transatlantic nature) of much of sexology during the early twentieth century.⁴

Reviewed by: Os Keyes
 University of Washington, USA
 okeyes@uw.edu

2 Lyn Raskin to Harry Benjamin, 7 January 1984, Series VI, Box 25, Folder 25, Harry Benjamin Collection, Kinsey Institute Library & Special Collections, Bloomington, Indiana.

3 Harry Benjamin to Alfred Kinsey, 3 December 1954, Dr. Alfred Kinsey era correspondence, Kinsey Institute Library & Special Collections, Bloomington, Indiana.

4 See Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Heike Bauer, *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017); Benjamin Kahan, *The Book of Minor Perverts: Sexology, Etiology, and the Emergences of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).