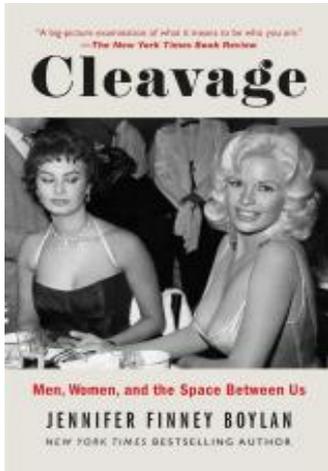

Cleavage: Men, Women, and the Space Between Us

by Jennifer Finney Boylan



About the Book

What is the difference between men and women? Jennifer Finney Boylan, the bestselling author of SHE'S NOT THERE and co-author of MAD HONEY with Jodi Picoult, examines the divisions --- as well as the common ground --- between the genders and reflects on her own experiences, both difficult and joyful, as a transgender American.

SHE'S NOT THERE was the first bestselling work written by a transgender American. Since its publication 20 years ago, Jennifer Finney Boylan has become the go-to person for insight into the impact of gender on our lives --- from the food we eat to the dreams we dream, both for ourselves and for our children. But CLEAVAGE is more than a deep dive into gender identity; it's also a look at the difference between coming out as trans in 2000 --- when many people reacted to Boylan's transition with love --- and the present era of blowback and fear.

How does gender affect our sense of self? Our body image? The passage of time? The friends we lose --- and keep? Boylan considers her womanhood, reflects on the boys and men who shaped her, and reconceives of herself as a writer, activist, parent and spouse. With heart-wrenching honesty, she illustrates the feeling of liminality that followed her to adulthood, but demonstrates the redemptive power of love through it all.

With Boylan's trademark humor and poignancy, CLEAVAGE is a sharp, witty and captivating look at the triumphs and losses of a life lived in two genders. It provides hope for a future in which we all have the freedom to live joyfully as men, as women and in the space between us.

Discussion Guide

- 1.** Jenny describes this book as a "bookend" to SHE'S NOT THERE, her 2003 memoir. Did you read that earlier book? What has changed for Jenny, and what has remained the same?
- 2.** In the chapter titled "Food," Jenny describes the way transition has altered her relationship to cooking, eating and --- most of all --- her own body image. Do the women you know struggle with these issues in a different way than the men you know? In what way are these struggles different?
- 3.** In the chapter titled "Voice," Jenny talks about the desire to fit in, to "pass" as female undetected. Have you ever wanted to fit in so badly with other people that you lost part of yourself? What is gained and what is lost when we fit into a new group?
- 4.** Were you surprised at Jenny's reaction when Zai came out? How would you react if your own child --- or someone else you loved --- came out as trans?
- 5.** In "The Heisenberg Variations" chapter, Jenny seems to suggest that the processes we go through to reinvent ourselves is similar, if not identical, to what's involved when writers revise their work on the page? Have you ever tried to write your own story? Is it harder to revise than to invent?
- 6.** In describing her friendships, Jenny seems to have decidedly different relationships with her male friends than with women. Are your friendships different depending on the sex of your friend? Would your friendship remain the same if they changed genders?
- 7.** What role do you think Jenny's sense of humor plays in her ability to survive and adapt?
- 8.** Did you know a lot about the lives of transgender people before you read CLEAVAGE? If not, how has your opinion changed after reading the book?
- 9.** Jenny describes the word "cleavage" as a contronym --- that is, a word that means its own opposite. Do you think men and women are "opposites"? What opposites, or contradictions, do you think you contain?
- 10.** One of the questions Jenny wrestles with is whether or not she is "the same person" before and after transition. Do you think you'd be the same person if you changed genders? What about you would change, besides the physical?
- 11.** In the chapter "Shadows," Jenny confronts the danger that she finds herself in, and that women sometimes find themselves in, in this world. If you are a woman, have you ever felt unsafe? Do you think men properly understand the sense of danger that women sometimes face?
- 12.** Jenny's wife, Deedie, seems to love her wife for who she is, not for whatever body she is packaged in. If the person you loved changed genders, would you be able to stay with them? Do you think Deedie is exceptional? Or is she simply doing what lovers do, when their loved one is in trouble?

Author Bio

Jennifer Finney Boylan is the author of 19 books, including *MAD HONEY*, coauthored with Jodi Picoult. Her memoir, *SHE'S NOT THERE*, was the first bestselling work by a transgender American.

Since 2014, she has been the inaugural Anna Quindlen Writer in Residence at Barnard College of Columbia University. She is also on the faculty of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference of Middlebury College and the Sirenland Writers Conference in Positano, Italy. She is the President of PEN America, and from 2011 to 2018 she was a member of the Board of Directors of GLAAD, including four years as national cochair. In 2022-23, she was a Fellow at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She graduated from Wesleyan University and Johns Hopkins, and she holds doctorates *honoris causa* from Sarah Lawrence College, the New School and Wesleyan University.

For many years she was a contributing opinion writer for the opinion section of the *New York Times*. Her work has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, *Literary Hub*, *Down East*, and many other publications. She lives in Maine and New York with her wife, Deirdre. They have two children: a daughter, Zai, and a son, Sean.

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