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Dr. Harry Benjamin (1885-1986) lived a remarkable life straddling a century of social, political, and scientific change. Born in Berlin, he studied with European medical luminaries, practiced medicine in New York and San Francisco, and throughout his long career, was internationally influential as a medical maverick and criticized as a quack. Readers probably know of either his earlier years as an endocrinologist and purveyor of “revitalization” therapies, or his later advocacy for transgender patients. But such a bifurcation, historian Alison Li argues, misses the sum of Benjamin's life and influence on the modern world.

Li offers a sorely needed, vindicating biography in *Wondrous Transformations: A Maverick Physician, the Science of Hormones, and the Birth of Transgender Revolution* that explores the “meaningful link between his early fascination with glandular science and the transgender medicine for which he is better known” (p. 207). Throughout, she argues that science is socially constructed, a “human attempt to make sense of the world” that is “shaped by particular human minds born of particular times, places, and cultures” (p. 210). Li urges us to situate histories of science in relation to human stories, to investigate ideas along with practitioners, patients, and personal milieus. Benjamin walked in many circles, connecting a pantheon of nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists, socialites, industrial magnates, scientists, poets, opera singers, novelists, and sexologists, among others. Some were his patients, whom he genuinely cared for, listened to, and sought to help, simply because he valued their well-being and emotional states. Benjamin was equally at home with the urban rich and famous, as well as sex workers (about whom he wrote a sympathetic book), homosexuals, and others society disdained.

Li situates Benjamin within larger cultural, geopolitical, and scientific shifts, seeking to answer how “this purveyor of Jazz Age rejuvenation...
treatments” became called “the ‘Father of Transsexualism’” and how his life connected with “the rise of the science of hormones, which burgeoned in the early twentieth century” (p. x). This framing is smart, allowing Li to offer a “story of continuity rather than disjunction” (p. 207). Across his life, Benjamin possessed a rational, pragmatic, flexible mind. While convinced of the biological origins of medical issues, he recognized his areas of ignorance and pivoted when evidence suggested he should. Such flexibility enabled his success and survival. He was personally and professionally caught between the “old” world of Europe and the “new” of American innovation and opportunity. Ultimately, flexibility helped him help found gerontology—seeking to revitalize patients by “adding life to one’s years rather than years to one’s life” (p. 125)—and become transsexualism’s “father,” “an accident for which he was totally prepared” that led to his most influential publication, _The Transsexual Phenomenon_ (1966) (pp. 158-159).

Benjamin’s success also stemmed from the good will generated by his “old world” charm. His patients adored him, routinely referring their friends to him. “Just his approach is enough to make one feel better. He doesn’t scare the life out of you the way some doctors do,” Otto Kahn remarked (p. 107). Benjamin “elevated courtesy to the point where it became personality” and was “kindness itself” (pp. 108, 124). Li also showcases the devotion friends had for Benjamin and the importance of women as his influential collaborators. These included Gertrude Atherton, Virginia Allen, and his wife, Gretchen, among others. Such relationships undergirded his career; Li so gloriously renders them I was unexpectedly moved by how humanely he treated patients, even when society disapproved.

Li’s preface starts with Benjamin treating trans patient Val Barry. Then she offers her research questions and explains her justification for writing biography: “in giving attention and space to a single story, we see so clearly the rich contingencies, complexities, and contradictions that form an actual life” (p. xii). Thereafter, overlapping chapters are loosely chronological. Chapter 1 discusses how in 1915, at age thirty, hormones became Benjamin’s “consuming passion” under the tutelage of Joseph Fraenkel (p. 2). Chapters 2 and 3 discuss his family, education, military service, arrival in the United States, and experience of World War I. Chapters 4 and 5 link his interests in rejuvenation and sexology through his “glandular view of life” (p. 33). Li renovates Eugen Steinach’s reputation—his surgical and hormonal therapies remain controversial—by showing his positive influences on Benjamin. She explores Vienna’s understudied Vivarium, a center researching living animals and hormones run by Steinach, biologist Paul Kammerer, and associates. And she details interactions with Magnus Hirschfeld, who was building his sexology center in Berlin.

Chapter 6 describes Benjamin’s return to New York City, promotion of Steinach’s therapies, and patients including Atherton, who credited him with restoring her productivity and remained a patron, promoter, and friend thereafter. Her resulting bestselling novel, _Black Oxen_ (1923), dealt with a woman restored to vitality. Chapter 7 discusses visits with Steinach and Sigmund Freud in Europe and how _Journal of the American Medical Association_ editor Morris Fishbein, among others, labeled Benjamin a fraud. Benjamin sued him for libel, convinced of his treatment’s efficacy. But these midlife challenges, further developed in chapter 8, showcase how he was caught between worlds professionally, personally, and geographically until the Nazi betrayal of Germany. “After the collapse of sexology in Berlin and Vienna,” he was among “a small number of surviving links to a once flourishing and avant-garde intellectual tradition” (p. 133). Li posits Benjamin (and Hirschfeld, whose center the Nazis destroyed) as representing a foreclosed, better Germany.
Chapters 9 through 11 focus on Benjamin's work with transgender patients. Recognizing a gender spectrum, and influenced by Hirschfeld and Alfred Kinsey, he created a six-point “Sexual Orientation” scale from the occasional transvestite to the “true” transsexual having psycho-sexual inversion who sought to transition (p. 179). His revitalization treatments involving hormonal, surgical, and radiotherapeutic techniques could also feminize or masculinize those seeking gender transitions. He saw gender identity and sexuality as distinct, challenging preconceptions that those who transitioned should thereafter be heterosexual. While Benjamin preferred hormonal treatments over surgery, his *Transsexual Phenomenon* and advocacy for adjusting the body to the mind put “transsexualism on the agenda of every sexology program” and enabled the creation of university-based gender reassignment clinics, such as John Money's (p. 182). These chapters feature notable trans figures including Christine Jorgensen, Reed Erickson, Louise Ergestrasse, and Jan Morris, among others.

Li is careful not to dwell on hagiography. Benjamin had professional misadventures: his publicized work often came with the “taint of the illicit” (p. 81). A business venture with Casimir Funk and Benjamin Harrow failed. Most revealing was how Benjamin suffered from supreme self-doubt, even wishing he had never been born. This evidence productively humanizes Benjamin, as does chapter 12, which follows him in declining health as he ruminated upon his legacy.

Li wisely discusses Susan Stryker's argument that Benjamin is now remembered as a compassionate, if paternalistic advocate for trans rights. [1] Nevertheless, he remains controversial for coining “gender dysphoria” as a medical condition (p. 160); his International Gender Dysphoria Association by the 1970s developed standards of care for “gender identity disorder” that some now regard as pathologizing and patronizing (p. 206). Li contextualizes these standards: they derived from his cautious, decades-long approaches to ensure a patient's suitability. Citing Ian Hacking's “looping effect,” she suggests Benjamin is partially responsible for trans identity formation; by defining a category, he helped change the experiences of people classified by it, who “in turn, challenge[d] the way the category is defined” (p. 183).[2] In her epilogue, she suggests Benjamin would be pleased with “today’s rich, confident culture of gender-queer, nonbinary and gender nonconforming people” (p. 207).

I do have some critiques. The most significant regards an ironic reliance on psychoanalysis to understand Benjamin's sexuality and compassion for sexual minorities. Li describes how Freud psychoanalyzed Benjamin in 1928; upon learning he was impotent despite Gretchen's attractiveness, Freud suggested Benjamin was a latent homosexual, infuriating him. Li asks, “was there any validity to Freud's insight,” and “could there have been anything about Benjamin's own sexuality that might explain his sympathy with sexual minorities?” (p. 87). While Li warns Freud's claim is difficult to prove without “descending to gossip,” she seemingly does so anyway, noting that Gretchen was sexually unfulfilled, Benjamin considered himself a “ladies’ man,” and his gay colleague and potential protege Charles Ihlenfeld disputed that Benjamin was gay. She also notes his fetish for “thin girls with very long hair” (pp. 87-88). Li thinks these glimpses link “a fraught inner life marked by distant unattainable love interests, a fascination with the glamour of stage and film, and a troubled marital bed with a face characterized by compassion for those marginalized for their hidden longings. But ultimately, what erotic secrets Benjamin kept, we can still only guess” (p. 88).

Li's own psychoanalyzing speculation flirts with essentialism, suggesting perhaps only those with homosexual tendencies or secret “torments” would have sympathy for sexual minorities. At best, it helps explain why Benjamin regarded psy-
choanalysis as “unscientific” (p. 87). But on the whole, it actually works against her well-crafted themes of Benjamin’s compassion regardless of a patient’s background.

On a lesser note, certain sections flow in a stream of consciousness. Chapter 8 begins referencing Benjamin and then shifts to Christopher Isherwood’s visit with Hirschfeld in Weimar Berlin. This shift may result from Li seeking to tell a broader story than Benjamin’s alone. Similarly, in chapter 9 she notes that Jorgensen’s debut in New York occurred simultaneously to the 1953 Mt. Everest expedition, which included trans journalist Morris, whose subsequent report of the Everest sumitting Li then links to Elizabeth II’s corona‐

tion. The events are historically interesting, but their significance to Benjamin (or vice versa) remains disjointed; sometimes, he comes off as a minor character in his own biography.

Li also cites Emily Skidmore’s *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (2017), which focused on fin-di-siècle trans individuals, but actually discusses her 2008 article on Jorgensen more, without citing it.[3] This omission creates the illusion that *True Sex* contained this information. This is also a missed opportunity to discuss the race of Benjamin’s patients: Skidmore argued Jorgensen’s acceptance as a veritable woman hinged on her effective portrayal of white womanhood and rejecting trans women of color.

Another missed opportunity: because of her transatlantic lens, Li makes little mention, aside from European examples, of where trans Americans sought surgical treatments. Surprisingly, Mexico is omitted, despite Benjamin referring patients there for years, something mentioned in *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, his correspondence (now housed at the Kinsey Institute), and other scholarship (see Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, 2002).[4] Similarly, engagement with his global audience (see Howard Chiang, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific*, 2021) and sexology as a “traveling culture” (see Veronika Fuechtner, Douglas E. Haynes, and Ryan M. Jones, eds., *A Global History of Sexual Science*, 2017) would have better contextualized the sexological exchanges Benjamin traversed.

Despite these minor critiques, *Wondrous Transformations* is a commendable, extensively researched, long-overdue examination of Benjamin’s life. Li convincingly demonstrates that historical biography reveals more than just an individual life, but instead, helps humanize larger phenomena, in this case, sweeping scientific changes that shaped our modern world in familiar and unexpected ways. As Li puts it, Benjamin’s “hormonal view of life—and its associated technologies for fashioning the self” ties his story “to us all” (p. xiii). This book deserves a wide audience.

Notes


[4]. For recent scholarship discussing trans cases in Mexico, Jorgensen, and Benjamin, see Ryan M. Jones, “‘Now I Have Found Myself, and I am Happy:’ Marta Olmos, Sex Reassignment, the Media and Mexico on a Global Stage, 1952-7,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 55, no. 3 (2023): 455-89.
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