

**Dazzling darkness:
Gender, sexuality, illness and God**

**Rachel Mann.
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Book Review by Dr Alison J Gray

As a liaison psychiatrist talking to a theologian friend about coping with chronic illness I was challenged to read this short autobiography. It has a great depth of psychological, philosophical and theological insight. The writing is rich with poetry, story and deep self-disclosure. The author, Rachel Mann is an Anglican priest who has experienced several physical and mental health challenges.

Rachel was born Nick and always felt like a woman.

We catch a glimpse of Nick age 5, playing with a Tonka toy truck, the ultimate boy's toy, running headlong from his wish to be a girl. A glimpse of Nick at 12 praying regularly that when he woke up he would be female. We see Nick as a teenager into drink, drugs and heavy metal. As a young married man Nick finally comes out as transsexual, having reached the painful recognition that for Rachel to flourish Nick must die. The author pulls no punches over this, regretting but not masking the cost of this sex change to her family, friends and herself.

Rachel began transitioning in 1993, taking hormones that led to a speeded-up second adolescence, struggling to find her female voice and learning to dress and walk like a woman. This was a challenging period of seeming 'neither one thing nor the other' externally, whilst being firmly female on the inside.

What comes across above all is that Rachel did not feel she had any real choice in her transitioning; she was bringing her external appearance into line with her internal knowledge of herself, even though that meant destruction of perfectly good male genitalia and giving up fertility. She learned much through this period about herself and others. 'There is a way of knowing that works only by suffering, by alienation and pain... to journey into 'the in-between' was for me revelatory and deepening- bringing a shift not only in sympathy but in empathy and solidarity with the ridiculed, the broken, and excluded.'

She acknowledges all that she lost in leaving behind her male life in terms of a Greek tragedy, caught between two equally horrific courses of action; to abandon relationships and marriage and radically alter her body, or to remain in the marriage and continue to attempt to suppress her gender dysphoria. Nick was destroyed and slowly Rachel emerged. Tellingly she describes this as a process of life 'coming together rather than fragmenting', a journey into wholeness, no longer needing to wear a mask or play a part.

During this period Rachel began to want to pray, a yearning and thirsting for God. As a good atheist, she resisted, feeling prayer was ridiculous. She finally began to pray and felt 'absurdly loved - utterly unconditionally loved. For exactly who I was.' This was the start of a totally unexpected faith journey.

Rachel tackles head on the suggestion that this faith is purely a comfort blanket; she acknowledges the emotional turmoil she was going through and the support she found in her new Christian community. However her expectation pre-conversion led her to think that God would blame and reject her and so to experience loving acceptance was totally unexpected, and for her proves the validity of her conversion experience.

Rachel settled into an evangelical-charismatic Christian church where the bible is held in high esteem as God's word, and where God is expected to act in people's lives today. Soon she found her childlike faith being stretched and challenged, accelerating through her spiritual development just as she had through her induced second puberty. Her next crisis was in being a woman who loved women in a church that opposed homosexuality; this rejection led her to encounter the God of the outcasts, the God who is an outcast, as Jesus was in his crucifixion.

'God did not come to us in Christ as a superhero, as superman, solving all our problems through his superior strength and so on. He came to us as vulnerable as any of us, and as readily destroyed.'

In 1999. Rachel first began formally to explore her vocation to priesthood in the Church of England, something she had been aware of since her initial conversion. As for so many, others this was a painful, exposing process, which led to initial rejection. Almost at once ill-health intervened and she developed severe Crohn's disease, which delayed her much desired sex-reassignment operation, necessitating a colostomy, and later an ileostomy.

Rachel talks about the difficulties of adjusting to her changed body image, her inability to work, constant pain and her anger with God for putting her into this position, even though intellectually she knew it was not God's doing. How can someone tolerate the emotional and physical pain and cling on to their faith in God; how can we square the circle of a God who is all powerful, who loves us, and yet does not intervene to prevent suffering? For Rachel it is in this extreme suffering, in the dark that she encounters God.

'This was love that is only truly known in the difficult places, in a world where our usual strategies of control and success have failed. God did not come as a lightning bolt of grace lifting me up out of the pit with wondrous light and power. I found God in Christ squatting beside me in the darkness.'

In the midst of these multiple losses Rachel began to write, finding her own voice outside that of philosophy and academe, articulating at last who she is as a poet.

She first experiences God as 'unconditional love, then as one who suffers alongside, and then as the one who gives voice to the excluded, broken and

lost...’ God is trans and gay and chronically ill and a woman and everything else.

In 2002 Rachel was finally well enough to undergo sex reassignment surgery. She gives a clear description of the night before surgery, waiting wondering, questioning all over again, and finally discovering that the surgery confirmed her social reality as a woman.

‘There is a part of me that can see that life would have been easier and simpler if there had been a way in which I could have accepted my maleness and male body; but the fact is that, as painful as the surgery was, I would choose it again and again rather than be man. Such is the strength of my gender dysphoria.’

‘What does it mean to be a person of hope... in the midst of suffering with no apparent end in sight?’

This is a key question for many as they grapple with chronic illness. Rachel has been there, close to death through septicaemia, unable to eat solids for a year, and plunged into deep depression. Now she lives with an ileostomy, still at times struggling with her Crohn’s. She has found the Hebrew bible psalms are great help in times of anxiety and chronic pain, but not when struggling with active pain or crisis. Here at the extremes she has held onto a simple line of poetry from Siegfried Sassoon ‘O Jesus, make it stop!’ - fierce and extreme words for when the pain is extreme and utterly real. Hers is no fair-weather faith, but one born out of struggle and pain.

Through her transition and sex reassignment surgery, Rachel has become reconciled with herself, accepting a reality that she for years wanted to avoid, the drive to be a woman that she fought so hard against. Now she has also achieved reconciliation with her male side, with her history and with her occasionally mannish ways of talking and behaving. At last she can look back and acknowledge that she once was a happy boy, who loved guns and playing war.

This is a book about accepting loss, pain and finding God and ultimate healing in the dazzling darkness. It will help health professionals understand the internal experience of this trans-woman. It is written from a liberal Christian perspective, and will be an encouragement to many Christians who are at an earlier stage in their journey finding reconciliation with their gender dysphoria. It is a great encouragement to me that our national church has room in its ministry for someone as passionately alive and honest as Rachel; she continues ‘forging wholeness out of pain and confusion’.

Dazzling Darkness by Revd. Rachel Mann is available from: Wild Goose:
<http://www.ionabooks.com/2427-9781849522410-Dazzling-Darkness.html>

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