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Coming Out Can Be Murder by Renee James

Rachel S. Wexelbaum

St. Cloud State University, rswexelbaum@stcloudstate.edu

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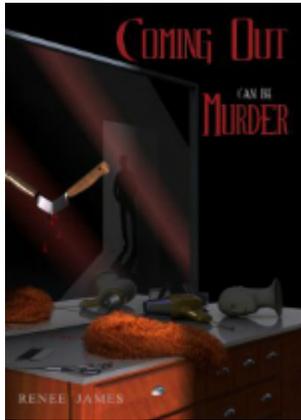
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‘Coming Out Can Be Murder’ by Renee James

Posted on 31. Jan, 2013 by Rachel Wexelbaum



Coming Out Can be Murder

By Renee James

Chi-Towne Fiction

Paperback, 9781935766285, 272 pp.

Experts estimate that the number of transgender people in the human population ranges from 1 in 1,000 to 1 in 10,000. Compared to the estimated number of lesbian, gay, or bisexual people in any given human population, the number of transpeople appears quite small. This is why the following statistics may shock you:

- 1 in 12 transgender people in America is murdered.
- Transgender youth account for nearly 20% of homeless people in cities such as Chicago.
- 49% of transgender people attempt suicide.
- Transgender people of color are three times more likely to be homeless, be murdered, or attempt suicide.

Renee James, President of the [Chicago Gender Society](#), educates people about transgender issues and provides support for transpeople. The people most in need of transgender education probably will read neither stuffy academic tomes nor books marketed specifically to an LGBT audience. James has written a murder mystery called *Coming Out Can Be Murder* (Chi-Towne Fiction). This novel started its life as a journal that James kept while she worked as a magazine editor. In the journal, James reflected on what her life could have been if she had chosen to become a transsexual woman rather than live as a bi-gendered male.

Coming Out Can Be Murder may be the first of its kind with a transgender protagonist, in addition to the more common transgender murder victim. Cleverly couched in a crime story written in accessible language, James informs readers of all of the issues and challenges that transpeople face in our society.

In the United States, homeless transgender youth and transpeople who lose their jobs once they “come out” and decide to transition may turn to prostitution or crime to support themselves. Around the world, transpeople often face restricted and prescribed employment options: prostitution, hairdressing, or entertainment. In most countries (including the United States), transgender prostitutes are most at risk for abuse and murder at the hands of their clients as well as the police. Some American cities, such as Baltimore and New York City, have chosen to “sweep out” their transgender prostitutes while leaving other prostitutes to work the streets. Unfortunately, these realities have often trickled down into stereotypes of transpeople as pathetic figures in movies and television shows. It is a pleasure to read a novel with an approachable transgender character who is neither a clown nor a stereotype.

The transgender protagonist and narrator of this novel, Bobbi Logan, works as a hairdresser in one of the top salons of Chicago. At first, she presents herself as a gay man, eventually gathering the courage to present as a woman. Bobbi often feels uncomfortable about her appearance, and is sensitive to how others react to her existence. She feels the need to explain her appearance and transsexual status to her clients, which results in losing quite a few of them in spite of the fact that she is one of the best stylists in the city. Some of Bobbi’s coworkers also begin to treat her with scorn, and passersby challenge her with insults and physical confrontations.

In spite of Bobbi’s struggles, she has a circle of friends in a M to F transgender support group. Through her social network, she learns about the murder of a young transwoman who belonged to the support group. The media had failed to cover this murder, and the police drag their feet on the investigation. Bobbi decides to take matters into her own hands to find her friend’s murderer. This quest puts Bobby in danger, as she becomes a desired conquest for rich power broker John Strand, and finds herself weak in the knees for him...

Writing genre fiction about LGBT characters and issues is a challenge, as certain readers interested in the topic but not the genre may avoid the book. For example, I do not normally read murder mysteries. In fact, I tend to steer clear of any library books with stickers other than call numbers on them. The probability that *Coming Out Can Be Murder* would appear in the mystery section of a public library, or get a “mystery” sticker so that mystery fans can find it easily, is quite high. I never would have discovered this book without a shout-out from Renee James herself. After reading *Coming Out Can Be Murder*, I may be more likely to browse murder mysteries in the future, if for no other reason than to find ones with LGBT characters and themes. At the same time, murder mystery fans *not* searching for LGBT stories will pick up *Coming Out Can Be Murder* simply because of its genre. These readers will receive a lesson in empathy and transgender awareness where they may least expect it.

Further Reading:

Abernathy, M. (n.d.). Truth in numbers, hate crimes statistics. *The Transadvocate*. Retrieved from <http://www.transadvocate.com/truth-in-numbers-hate-crimes-statistics.htm>

Farley, M. & Barkan, H. (1998). Prostitution, violence, and post-traumatic stress disorder. *Women & Health*, 27 (3): 37-49. Retrieved from http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/prostitution_research/000021.htm

National Center for Transgender Equality.(2011). National Center for Transgender Equality Resources. Retrieved from <http://transequality.org/Resources/index.html>

Stephens, C. (2012, May 29). Murder statistics of transgender people. What would JT do? [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/wwjtd/2012/05/murder-statistics-of-transgender-people/>

Transgender Europe. (2011). The Trans Murder Monitoring Project. Retrieved from <http://www.tgeu.org/node/53>

It is difficult to estimate the number of transgender people in the United States. People do not indicate whether or not they are transgender on a Census form; they will either check a box for their biological sex or intended sex. Some transpeople simply identify as straight men or women, especially if they have completed their transition, and want no further discussion of their previous life. Other transpeople still identify as queer in one way or another, and may always identify as transgender whether or not they choose to transition. For other transpeople, their racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, or professional identity will come before their gendered one. It is a matter of personal choice. For these reasons, while no one has determined the number of transpeople in the United States, if the American transpeople stood up to be counted, they would compose an extremely diverse group of people, impossible to categorize.