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"Being a girl was something that never really happened for me."—Rae Spoon

Ivan E. Coyote and Rae Spoon are accomplished, award-winning writers, musicians, and performers; they are also both admitted "gender failures." In their first collaborative book, Ivan and Rae explore and expose their failed attempts at fitting into the gender binary, and how ultimately our expectations and assumptions around traditional gender roles fail us all.

Based on their acclaimed 2012 live show that toured across the United States and in Europe, *Gender Failure* is a poignant collection of autobiographical essays, lyrics, and images documenting Ivan and Rae's personal journeys from gender failure to gender enlightenment. Equal parts hilarious and heartbreaking, it's a book that will touch LGBTQ readers and others, revealing, with candor and insight, that gender comes in more than two sizes.

Ivan E. Coyote is the author of six story collections and the award-winning novel *Bow Grip*, and is co-editor of *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*. Ivan frequently performs at high schools, universities, and festivals across North America.

Rae Spoon is a transgender indie musician whose most recent CD is *My Prairie Home*, which is also the title of a new National Film Board of Canada documentary about them. Rae's first book, *First Spring Grass Fire*, was a Lambda Literary Award finalist in 2013.

Gender Failure Details

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From Reader Review Gender Failure for online ebook

Jacob says

I READ THIS IN EXACTLY ONE (1) HOUR AND IT IS AS THE KIDS SAY EXTREMELY LIT

Sandy says

As a parent whose child has experienced many years and forms of bullying because of sexual orientation, I approached this very moving book hoping to gain understanding and to learn compassion. This book offers both to the reader with an open mind.

Ivan and Rae describe experiences shrouded in confusion, alienation, fear, frustration, and anger, and they also speak of courage, friendship, determination, growth, love, and evolution. In spite of the painful challenges along the way, each refuses to accept gender roles imposed by society but rather seeks to discover their own truth and - both gently and firmly - to define their daily life accordingly.

This book has left me with a jumble of emotions - humility; gratitude for the courage and honesty of the authors; hope for the future. I feel certain that I will ponder this book for years to come.

Joanne-in-Canada says

Raw, honest, direct, eloquent descriptions by two people whose lives and ideas differ from traditional perspectives on binary gender. Essential reading for every member of the human race.

Rachel Kramer Bussel says

I can't say enough good things about this book. Firstly, it's written by two authors, who each have different lived experiences and approaches to gender. Though they both reject our culture's insistence on a gender binary system and both share many commonalities, having two writing styles and approaches makes for an interesting read that never gets complacent. Secondly, the short format, which Ivan Coyote has mastered (do go read everything else Coyote has written too, because the use of language is so wonderfully succinct), means "big" topics like chest surgery and pronouns are broken down into smaller components, making for a rich reading experience.

Both grapple with being gender nonconforming, and explore how various alternative and mainstream communities react to them, their bodies and their gender (or non-gendered) presentations. I know my experience of using one will never be the same after reading Ivan Coyote on how hard it is to use public bathrooms (or washrooms). Coyote discussed many things I'd never considered before, including their genuine fear. This is a topic very much in the news of late, with Austin recently approving gender neutral bathrooms. While this book is certainly political, it is in the "personal is political" sense. Both authors evolve over the course of the book and, to my reading, want the reader to form their own conclusions as well. They both constantly confront their own stereotypes and beliefs around gender, packing and unpacking them,

exploring why one gender choice or pronoun or practice works for them at one point in time, and doesn't in another. The only negative thing I can say about this book is that it made me wish I'd caught the live acts, but these words are as alive as words on a page can be. Especially in the wake of Leelah Alcorn's death, this is an important book. No, not the only important book about gender, but one that illuminates many of the ways gender and gender roles are pushed on us from childhood and how that affects these authors as adults. Rae Spoon's experiments with YouTube take gender nonconformity into the world of music and online sharing and the results are sometimes heartening, sometimes sad. Whether or not you've ever thought about the meaning of gender before, this book is worth checking out. Also because the pieces are so short, you can read it all at once (I couldn't stop), or in smaller chunks.

Carolyn says

Gender Failure is a really simple book on simple issues that seem so complex. While Rae Spoon and Ivan Coyote narrate their various stories (tragic and hilarious, sometimes both at the same time) we see how gender is ambiguous, confusing, arbitrary, and evolving.

Rae Spoon writes how they came to use the "they/their" pronoun, how they first thought they were a straight woman, a lesbian, a gay transgender man, and then finally realising their identity as a non-binary person. The way Rae pieced their story together felt like we (the reader) were going on the journey with them, learning with them the complexities of the binary and how individuals can challenge or reject that gender binary.

Ivan Coyote's pieces made me cry and laugh more than Spoon's. I love Ivan Coyote and am reading through all of Coyote's works. Ivan has less rigid views on gender identity and supports using "they/their" pronouns but doesn't mind publicists using "she/her" and being mistaken for simply a trans man with "he/him" pronouns. Ivan talking about their trans woman friend who was forced to choose between cancer therapy and HRT broke my heart and their chapter on Trans Remembrance day and the ways it focusses only on trans suicides and is troubling in its remembering one day annually rather than advocating for remembering and considering trans folks EVERY DAY was so well written and beautiful. Other stories made me laugh out loud or wince with Ivan as they relate how binding for decades affected their health and the ways that recovery is almost a pleasant experience when you go through it with a friend.

READ THIS PLEASE. This is an important work that relates the Canadian trans, butch, and non-binary experience while remaining easily accessible, funny, episodic, and memorable. I loved it and would recommend it for those who want to learn more/read the experiences of those who question the gender binary, for trans/ non-binary folks themselves who want to feel less alone in a rigid binary-based world, for anyone interested in Rae Spoon's music or Ivan's life, and really any Canadian who doesn't already appreciate the heck out of these two strong individuals.

Darlene Stericker says

This is my second book by Ivan Coyote. He is such a compassionate and eloquent writer. I embraced the idea (of Rae Spoon's) of gender retirement. The back and forth of the two authors was great! This was a compelling book. I have reserved two more books of Ivan Coyote's. I want to read everything that I can by him.

Huldra says

Almost every chapter of *Gender Failure* made me cry. It's incredibly easy, in a world obsessed with the idea

that your genitals determine who you are at the most fundamental level, to feel that your own understanding of gender, and your own perception of self is faulty; that, at some level, you're just *making it all up*. So when two people you've never met, from the other side of the world, and assigned by society to the other side of the gender binary, write a book and express many of the same things you've been feeling all your life, and likewise identify outside of that binary, it breaks down the dam you never realised you'd built up in your heart, a torrent of emotions come flooding out, and you realise that, no, you weren't just making it up, and you're not alone.

The book is a collection of short stories, anecdotes and songs, written by the authors, Rae Spoon & Ivan Coyote, about their lives, their experiences with gender, and the struggle to understand your own identity. It came out of a show that the authors toured with across the US and Europe.

I'd recommend this to anyone who wants to understand what it is to be non binary, or to anyone who, like me, because of the pressures constantly put on us by our societies, has felt that their recognition of their own gender is "all in your head."

But then, where else would it be but in your head? That's where your fascination with 80's cartoons, or your preference for the colour green is. It's where all your hopes are, your plans for tomorrow's lunch date, your favourite risotto recipe. It's where everything that is truly you resides.

For those who have felt that this recognition is somehow fake then.

Lisa Marie Gabriel says

Gender retirement? What a wonderful idea! Everyone should read this beautifully written book, not just those affected by gender or sexuality. We have this whole ridiculous way of carrying on from birth to death that assigns our children with not only a genitally defined gender - which excludes intersex variations anyway - but along with that prescribes how we should behave – our jobs, interests, dress codes, hobbies and physical mannerisms. Ever stop to think how wrong this is? I have.

Physique for a start is something genetically determined, yes we can control our weight to some extent and we can work out to firm up or build up muscles, but height, shoulder width, body fat distribution, length of legs and arms relative to the torso are infinitely variable and actually immutable. I speak from experience here as a woman with broad shoulders, thick waist, narrow hips and short legs. Even long hair and a large bust does not prevent me being called "sir" occasionally in shops (even when wearing feminine clothes) or being given odd looks in public toilets from time to time. Those odd looks will accrue whether I am dressed in pants, shirt and coat (therefore butch or male) or wearing a pretty dress (obviously a guy in drag). People assume you are trans if you don't fit the female norm which is small and has broad hips, slim waist, narrow shoulders, generous butt and long legs. For a guy to be slender, short, slim featured, broad hipped, narrow shouldered – that must make him effeminate, right? Wrong! It is just the way we are. It is a product of our genes.

When you reach my exalted age, you are largely gender retired anyway. Whether you are male or female people in shops start calling you "sweetheart", "darling" or "love" or offering you their seat on the bus. It is nice in a way, but in all honesty many women retire from gender because some men look only for young, fertile companions that fit that physical stereotype of what is desirable in a female. Fact.

However, although I could go on and on in this review about my own pet hates and grumbles, and it is impossible to be cisgendered if society doesn't accept the way you look as typically female or typically male, I am not going to. All I am going to say is PLEASE read this book and next time you are in a situation where you could misgender someone and hurt their feelings, think of them as "they" and avoid using "sir" or "madam" if uncertain. Don't attack people in toilets or look at them sideways. You are part of the problem if

you do that, not any form of solution. In my opinion, there is no such thing as gender failure, there is only people's failure through childhood conditioning to respect their fellow human beings as individuals with a heart and soul, not binary gendered objects. Enough said?

Akiva says

If I had to put the way I felt about Gender Failure in a couple of words, those words might be "behind the times." I would have been ecstatic to read this before about 2012 or 2013 (ask me why *The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard* marks a watershed in transgender fiction and memoir---but that's another review), but it was published in 2014.

That's partly for intensely personal reasons: my own butch-identified top surgery was in February 2014, two months before "Gender Failure" was published, and after years of desperate searching for people who had made a similar journey. I felt a peculiar kind of hollowness as I read Coyote's words about the decision and the process (both emotional and bureaucratic), knowing how much it would have meant to me six months before, and not quite feeling it.

It's also political: Spoon and Coyote are (like me) the kind of white masculine-presenting female-assigned people who get undue attention in trans (and queer) communities, who take up so much of the airtime that people of color, trans women, and transfeminine people can hardly get a word in edgewise. Coyote at least makes an effort to talk about the disparity. Spoon seems... oblivious. One more work of white transmasculine memoir doesn't literally take the place of the books that non-white, non-transmasc trans people are writing, but that doesn't exactly let them off the hook either.

Michael Bryson says

I'm giving this five stars because I can't imagine how it could be different. It is pretty perfect in what it is and does.

Ivan E. Coyote and Rae Spoon alternate short chapters through the book, telling a range of stories about how they were born assigned female and then left that identity behind, or tried to.

The tried to part is, of course, dealing with other people, dealing with social expectations, getting caught in the gender binary, where you only have two options, M or F.

Both Coyote and Spoon tell about how they moved through many different options. They each call themselves gender failures. Spoon writes powerfully about how they (meaning Spoon, who has adopted this pronoun) has retired from gender. Each repeatedly tells stories about how they were misidentified, misrepresented, left to explain themselves over and over, often giving up and going with the socially expected flow, simply to board an airplane, or complete any number of ordinary activities. Make a living.

For the reader, this constant misrepresentation is exhausting and deeply saddening. One can hardly imagine having to perpetually live it.

This book began as a multimedia show that Coyote and Spoon toured. It includes song lyrics and photographs from that show. As a book it works fine. The stories of the two run parallel and sometimes

cross. Their voices are distinct, and they also amplify each other. Coyote tells the story of having breast removal surgery, after two decades of binding them. Spoon writes of the evolution of her musical career.

Evolutions, shifts and changes is the key here. How each captures the unfolding of their lives underscores the unknowingness of selves. We are never one thing, singular, locked down forever. The book is the stories of two trans, but it also reveals universals, if we care to listen. How to be a self, how to connect that self to others, how to overcome and protect oneself from other people's bullshit. The building blocks of life. Great book.

Judy says

Loved it

Wondy says

I read this over a couple nights before bed, wanting to love it and growing steadily more and more dissatisfied as I went along. I share a lot identity categories with Rae Spoon and Ivan E. Coyote and I think a version of me in college in 2010 and 2011 would have loved these essay to pieces and latched onto them as a lifeline. But five years later, something about it just rings deeply, deeply hollow.

Part of it is that Spoon and Coyote are representatives from the very over represented white, assigned female at birth cadre. I am too, and there's nothing wrong with that. But it feels like a narrative that has been told and told again in queer communities, and I'm left wondering what this particular version is meant to contribute. If it had been sold to me in recommendations as a good retelling, then I might feel less disappointed. But these stories, as important as they obviously are to Spoon and Coyote, feel very well-trod.

And honestly, I struggled a lot with the fact that there was so, so little examination of how being masculine of center (and frankly, it felt a little disingenuous how that notion felt so rejected by both of them?) provides a level of cachet and privilege in queer communities. I kept coming back to the notion of gender retirement. It's such an interesting idea, but it felt facile! Spoon talking about how he is a more personally acceptable pronoun than she. Coyote talking about disliking them and their girlfriend being called ladies. If the masculine is so much acceptable than the feminine, is that really retirement from gender?

(I say none of this to criticize Spoon and Coyote's genders, but rather because I see this kind of dissonance a lot, and I think it needs to be examined for more than it is.)

I personally found Ivan E. Coyote's sections better written and more interesting than Spoon's, particularly the tension between being butch and being trans. I wish there had been greater examination of that tension; Coyote brushed against it in talking about having butches come up to thank them for being unapologetically butch and simultaneously having young trans men come up and thank them for the same thing.

Ashley D-- says

Very interesting read. A lot of it was basic enough for new readers of any trans content, but well written enough to be worth reading as someone who already knows the lesson. Great discussions of complicated

matters like discrimination within the LGBT community. I've read a lot of Ivan Coyote's writing, but none of Rae Spoon's (just listened to their music), and I was really impressed by Spoon's chapters. Even Ivan seemed to have had a lot more critical breakthroughs since the last time I checked--I have found some of their stuff a bit essentialist and femme-objectifying in the past, but that wasn't present here at all.

I got the feeling that both writers cared about intersectionality, but obviously their experiences are quite white. Hopefully this book widens the market for more diverse discussions about complicated gender experiences.

I'd recommend this book to anyone airing the whole "losing butches to transition" complaint, or to anyone just getting into conversations about trans people. I'd say the audience is adult not because it has anything inappropriate for teens, but because I don't think it would hold much interest for younger readers who aren't avidly looking for trans non-fiction.

Carolyn says

This book should be mandatory for all to read. It not only reminded me of the injustices that transgendered people suffer, but it helped me to realize that we shouldn't try to categorize everyone as either male or female. Although most people do fit squarely into one or the other gender, there are those who simply aren't truly one or the other. The authors create a good argument for creating language that includes all people, regardless of whether or not they consider themselves male, female or something that transcends both.

Ollie says

I liked this book, but it wasn't AMAZING. Ivan's writing is clearly stronger than Rae's, so maybe that had something to do with it. There were a few things that were written that, as a 25-year-old also white afab nonbinary person, made me cringe because we're all very sure that the way we talk and think about gender is the correct way. Ivan and Rae struck me as a little more old school ("transgendered") but for me it was a good exercise in learning about the nuances of similar trans and queer experiences. At times I felt like Ivan's stories about Rosie in the beginning were just lip service to trans women, because sometimes Ivan would say something like, "I obviously don't look like a lady" which is something that comes off as quite transmisogynistic and counter to what Ivan said before about using the pronouns she/her when talking to kids so kids know that there are so many ways to be she (which, in some kids futures, might mean also being ladies). So again, some of these kinds of inconsistencies are simply the result of reading the collected works of people who write about something they are constantly thinking about and their perspectives are always shifting. I can relate.

I appreciated Rae's willingness to be vulnerable and share with us the times they fucked up pronouns or said something insensitive. It was also really fascinating to learn about rural Canadian cultures. I'm glad to know Rae did/does country/folk music because I'm a queer kid in Texas who wants something familiar.

I picked up this book right before my top surgery, and Ivan's experience about getting top surgery without hormones really resonated with me. I want Ivan to be my big sibling, honestly.

Overall, I liked it and I'll probably come back to it. There isn't really a problem with the book - it's just that personal perspectives about gender are so... personal; something is bound to rub you the wrong way or not resonate the way you'd hoped.

Dorian says

This book is amazing amazing amazing.

CaseyTheCanadianLesbrarian says

I've been putting off writing a review of Ivan E. Coyote and Rae Spoon's collaborative book *Gender Failure* since I read an advanced reading copy back in March. This is despite the fact that I had two type-written pages of notes that I'd made as I was reading the book. The thing is, this book started off on the wrong foot with me, and I was never able to quite shake it.

Let's go back a step: *Gender Failure* is an adaptation of Ivan and Rae's extremely successful performance tour of the same name. The book really carries over the multi-media aspect of the performance and is genre-bustingly awesome. It's interspersed with handwritten song lyrics, photographs, illustrations. I especially love the dress-up cut-out doll of Ivan! It's no coincidence that gender and genre are only one letter off, and this book refuses to play by the rules of either.

...

In Rae Spoon's intro, they describe themselves as a "gender-neutral (formerly trans masculine) person." This immediately rubbed me the wrong way and I had to sit and think about why for a long time. Obviously, Spoon has full rights to identify their gender however they want and to use the pronoun they, that goes without saying. I mean, I hate that I even have to write that, because it sounds patronizing. But to refuse to admit they fall onto the trans masculine scale—as someone who identifies as trans, was female assigned at birth (FAAB), and has a relatively masculine gender presentation—just doesn't feel right to me.

In particular, this disavowal of the trans masculine fails to acknowledge the privilege trans masculine folks have in contrast to trans feminine folks. This is something I've learnt from reading trans women writers, and it's something that runs rampant in lesbian/queer women's communities in particular. It's not within someone's right to self-identify to deny gender-based privilege where it exists, particularly in queer men's and women's communities where the privilege of masculinity—even of the trans variety—often goes unchecked. Rae does specify that they benefit from privilege "especially in queer communities," which I appreciate. But they don't address the fact that their very terms of identification—"gender-neutral (formerly trans masculine)"—erase and conflate the very real power imbalance between trans male/masculine and trans female/feminine people....

See my full review here: <http://caseythecanadianlesbrarian.wor...>

Elizabeth Nelson says

I loved this book a lot, and even though neither of the authors' stories are exactly mine, there were parts that resonated with me, especially Rae's "My Body is a Spaceship" and Ivan's "The Rest of My Chest" but really the whole book was amazing. There were times I wanted to cry and times I wanted to cheer, and it was exactly what I needed in my current gender mood. I will definitely seek out more books and videos by both

of them!

Jill says

This is exactly what I've been looking for, and I'm so glad I found it. I've never seen their shows, so I can't compare, but I will be keeping an eye out for them in the future, if they are still touring. The biggest takeaway for me was the reassurance that existing somewhere outside the gender binary is not just possible, but real and valuable. Thank you. A thousand times, thank you. Though I don't necessarily see myself there, it still helped me feel less alone, somehow.

Both Rae and Ivan's stories were moving in different yet complementary ways. I appreciated their up-front acceptance of their own privilege, despite some of the oppression they face. I loved Ivan's chapter on Trans Awareness day and pointing out the difference between how trans men and trans women are accepted. I reveled in Ivan's self-acceptance and pronoun fluidity, as well as how they weathered the top-surgery-without-hormones debate from doctors. And I just wanted to hug Rae. All the time.

I don't usually buy books, but I finished this and could think of several people (and libraries) to which I need to give this book. Everyone needs to read this. If I can't afford a box of them, I will at least get myself one and underline, star, heart, and exclamation point all over it.

It was real, it was thoughtful, it was everything I needed at this point in my life. I totally get if there are readers who will dislike this - to each their own - but not this reader.

Sharon says

I can't stop thinking about this book. It's a collection of essays by two queer artists. The essays alternate between Coyote and Spoon's perspectives and are interspersed with photos, song lyrics, and anecdotes. The essays contain stories about medical transition (including surgery) and social transition (including pronouns and presentation). Many of those stories are also about pursuing an arts career, spending time with friends and neighbors, and so on. Those everyday experiences that cis people take for granted inevitably intersect with the authors' experiences of gender. It's gripping and relatable and I want to pick it back up and immediately start reading it again.
