

Ross Fitzgerald

She Said, She Said: Love, Loss & Living My New Normal

By Anne M. Reid

A Sense of Place Publishing, 382pp, \$29.95.

Born in Melbourne, now living in Virginia, Anne Reid came to write this magnificent, searingly honest book as a means of coping with the gender transition of Paul, her husband of 12 years, with whom she had raised three children.

As Reid acknowledges, she is deeply indebted to other trans partners throughout Australia and the US whose wisdom and support she has relied on, and indeed still does.

She is also grateful to her immediate and extended families for helping her to grieve and to understand the difficult situation in which she found herself. As *She Said, She Said* makes poignantly clear, it was so important for Reid to know she was not alone, and remains so.

The book details the disruption to a family when one partner undergoes gender reassignment. Here, it's Reid's husband. Similar stories are usually told from the viewpoint of the transitioning person, and typically focus on the intense conflict brewing within them.

This book is different. It's mainly about family relationships. As the partner of a transitioning person, Reid explains in sometimes delicate detail the effect this has on her and her children.

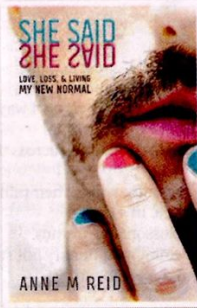
At first, she is aghast when Paul reveals his intentions, late on a summer night in June 2015. At no stage in 12 years of marriage had he expressed any inclination for, or interest in, changing sex.

Reid is in shock as her husband reveals that as a child he felt like a girl and dressed in girls' clothes. At nine, he tried to



Author Anne Reid with her children and dog

Goodbye Paul, hello Paula



castrate himself. When puberty struck, he was so distressed by his bodily changes that he attempted suicide. In later teenage years these memories were dormant, but they returned in adulthood.

In a chapter entitled Opening the Door, Reid talks about a roller-coaster of emotions, ranging from palpable anger and sadness to grief and shame.

She also expresses sympathy for her husband, who had to suffer years of unhappiness about his sexuality, often at a seemingly unconscious level.

As Paul moves towards full

gender reassignment surgery, there is the question of whether their marriage can survive. Reid has no intention of, or interest in, a lesbian relationship. His sexual liberation deprives her of sexual fulfilment.

That's only the start of the problems. As Reid points out, the main trauma is losing the person who was her husband. The emerging transitioned person, Paula, has different likes and dislikes, a different level of sensitivity to the world around, and is consumed with her looks, breasts, make-up and clothing. Reid laments that Paula isn't the person she married.

I missed hearing Paul's voice. Paul's voice had a soft but deeper timbre and I found this particularly soothing when we were

apart and speaking on the phone. I also missed the "big voice" that would bring the children to attention.

Then there are the children. They, seeming to take the change in their stride, deliberate on what to call Paula. Reid is adamant that Mummy is out of the question. "That name was earned through all the years of periods, pregnancies, breastfeeding, mastitis, vomit, explosive diarrhoea, sleepless nights, reading and researching childhood maladies, preparing nutritious meals, stroller-pushing, kid-wrangling."

The children settle on Maddy, a mix of mummy and daddy. When one decides to introduce Paula as "my other mother", Reid frets about their children not having the male role model that Paul represented. She is anxious about them being ostracised, embarrassed or ridiculed by other children at school. While some of the couple's friends remain loyal and sympathetic, others in conservative Virginia become, and remain, distant and estranged.

Well-produced, easy to read, and packed with anecdotes, *She Said, She Said* has five sections. The first tells of the couple's early time together after meeting at the Caxton Hotel in Brisbane in 2003. They eventually move to the US, where Paul is employed as a specialist computer programmer.

The second section deals with Reid's trauma about Paul coming out. In the third, Paula explains in her own words the reasons for what she has done. The fourth deals with the aftermath of transitioning, and in the final section Reid discusses research she conducted into gender dysphoria.

This book has gained respect within the transgender community, including a ringing endorsement from Catherine McGregor: "Unlike so many accounts of this difficult journey, [Reid] also captures the deep loss of those who loved the trans person as they were."

She Said, She Said is an extremely powerful story. The raw emotion is explosive.

Ross Fitzgerald is emeritus professor of history and politics at Griffith University.

Compelling conversation based on sexuality

Louise Omer

How We Desire

By Carolin Emcke

Translated by Imogen Taylor

Text, 256pp, \$32.99

Carolin Emcke wants to talk about sex. The German philosopher and author, who is also an award-winning journalist and war correspondent, has had her 2013 book *Wie wir begehren* translated into English. Part memoir, part philosophy of sexuality, *How We Desire* examines the forces that shape how we get off.

"Sexuality is prescribed by norms," Emcke writes.

Social norms — expected standards of behaviour — are enforced in groups. The book opens with Emcke's first day of high school. Surrounded by a pack of teenagers, she is forced to fight a schoolmate.

It's a powerful image, the circle of shouting

of the schoolyard into a microcosm of society. This is a teenage panopticon, where witness enforces behaviour under threat of punishment.

Emcke takes us to school dances and holiday camps where boys and girls steal secret kisses and pair off for fumbles in the dark. Being attracted to the opposite sex is seen as normal, same-sex attraction is "different". But is this because teenagers merely step into norms laid out for them?

It's made clear that, in school and beyond, punishment for not fitting in is a real danger. Daniel is a boy with blond hair and broad shoulders in Emcke's year at school. Following rumours he was seen holding hands with a man, he is bullied for years. He commits suicide at 17.

Daniel haunts the narrative.

He is its centre of gravity but also its conscience. Emcke never lets us forget the grave consequences for those who deviate from the norm.

In examining how we think about desire, she criticises

answers. And this is precisely the point: endless possibilities.

What if our sexuality reinvents itself every time our desire shifts, every time the object of our desire changes? What if the nature of our desire is constantly changing — growing deeper, lighter, wilder, more reckless, more tender, more selfish, more devoted, more radical?

The development of desire — in flux, cumulative, changing — grates against the fixed labels of gay, straight and bisexual. Emcke's dissatisfaction with identity politics is illustrated by a scene at a heterosexual wedding. Giddy with the celebration of the day, she arrives at the reception and takes a seat at her prescribed table. It's only when she meets the surrounding guests that she realises she is seated at the "gay table".

Why, she asks with indignation, is her personhood reduced to who

removed from its political reality. "Identities aren't only a matter of choice," she writes — and here, her words tremble with fury. "They are also constructed, assigned, ascribed; they come accompanied by restrictions, by a history of criminalisation, by denunciation and neglect; they are bound up with prejudices, ignorance and convictions."

We are reminded that, only 70 years ago, to be recognised as homosexual could mean a death sentence in Nazi Germany.

Emcke guides us through a social history of public attitudes towards queer people in the past 100 years: from violent persecution, to the belief that the AIDS crisis was punishment for immorality, to the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. To be ousted as gay is still a scandal for some politicians and celebrities, and can destroy careers. Again, not conforming to prescribed norms is punished.

There are only several points lost in translation as German politics and law are neatly contextualised. The oddest point of reading *How We Desire* is that it was first published five

HOW WE DESIRE