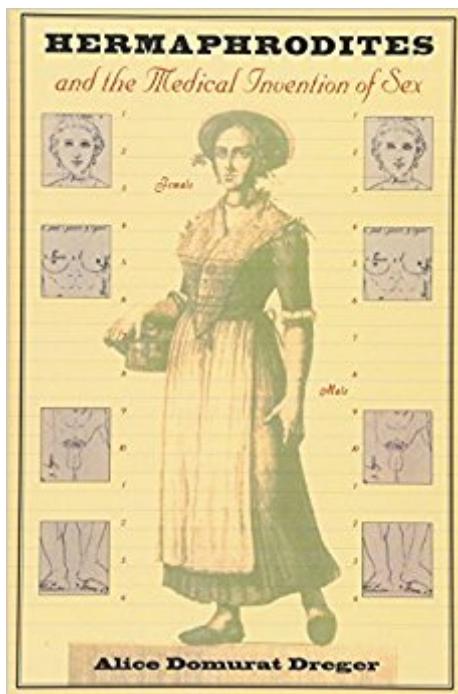


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# Hermaphrodites And The Medical Invention Of Sex



## Synopsis

Punctuated with remarkable case studies, this book explores extraordinary encounters between hermaphrodites--people born with "ambiguous" sexual anatomy--and the medical and scientific professionals who grappled with them. Alice Dreger focuses on events in France and Britain in the late nineteenth century, a moment of great tension for questions of sex roles. While feminists, homosexuals, and anthropological explorers openly questioned the natures and purposes of the two sexes, anatomical hermaphrodites suggested a deeper question: just how many human sexes are there? Ultimately hermaphrodites led doctors and scientists to another surprisingly difficult question: what is sex, really? *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* takes us inside the doctors' chambers to see how and why medical and scientific men constructed sex, gender, and sexuality as they did, and especially how the material conformation of hermaphroditic bodies--when combined with social exigencies--forced peculiar constructions. Throughout the book Dreger indicates how this history can help us to understand present-day conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexuality. This leads to an epilogue, where the author discusses and questions the protocols employed today in the treatment of intersexuals (people born hermaphroditic). Given the history she has recounted, should these protocols be reconsidered and revised? A meticulously researched account of a fascinating problem in the history of medicine, this book will compel the attention of historians, physicians, medical ethicists, intersexuals themselves, and anyone interested in the meanings and foundations of sexual identity.

## Book Information

Paperback: 268 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; 3rd Printing edition (March 4, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674001893

ISBN-13: 978-0674001893

Product Dimensions: 9.3 x 6.1 x 0.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 9 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #286,056 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #23 in Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Clinical > Surgery > Urology #39 in Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Urology #79 in Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Basic Sciences > Genetics

## Customer Reviews

The condition of hermaphroditism has been recognized since antiquity. The term derives from the Greek legend of the joining of Hermaphroditos and the nymph Salmacis into a single form that was neither male nor female, but both. Culturally, men and women are distinct, yet their sexual structures arise from common bipotential precursors. This fact explains how intersexuality can result from aberrations in the sexual-differentiation pathway. In *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, Alice Domurat Dreger chronicles the medical diagnosis and treatment of hermaphroditism from the perspective of both the subject and the medical community during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She traces the advancement of medical technology and its effects on the classification of persons with intersexual disorders. The book covers the period during which sexual identity was being questioned in both scientific and medical theory and the ideas of sex, sexuality, and gender had not yet become distinct from one another. During this time, one's "true sex" was felt to be based solely on the presence of a testis or an ovary. The number of people recognized with hermaphroditism was increasing, in part because of improved access to gynecologic care and more reporting of medical findings in the literature. This increase led to the need for criteria to define maleness and femaleness in order to keep the two sexes distinct. Also during this time, physicians emerged as the authorities in determining sex and anatomical identity. To show the effect of cultural differences in the management of intersexual disorders, Dreger has chosen to study hermaphrodites in Britain and France. Dreger uses case histories of people with intersexual conditions and describes the responses of their physicians to illustrate why definitions of true sex were thought to be necessary. She explores the social, economic, and political ramifications of having a "mistaken" sex. In her book, the term "hermaphrodite" is used loosely to describe someone with ambiguous genitalia or someone whose external genitalia do not correspond with the internal gonads; she does not necessarily use it to imply true hermaphroditism (the presence of both testicular and ovarian tissue). An epilogue has been added to the book to cover the treatment of intersexual conditions today and to show how history influences present-day management. Unfortunately, Dreger's description of present-day management is not up to date. Over the past few years, the voice of people with intersexual conditions has grown louder through autobiographies and the formation of support groups. Dreger has included in the epilogue the histories of people with intersexual conditions who were dissatisfied with their care. Dreger believes that the current management of intersexual disorders remains very paternalistic. She states:||Doctors typically make decisions about sex assignment with little genuine discussion with the parents. Parents who will not consent to recommendations are subject to pressure, and even those parents who do agree to the

surgeries performed do not realize that they are, by implication, consenting to the doctor's right to choose the sex of their child on the basis of a particular anatomically demanding psychosocial theory of gender identity. She concludes with a plea for "an honest conversation" between physicians and parents. Currently, though, physicians do openly discuss with parents everything that is known about intersexual conditions. However, there is still much that is unknown about the cause of such conditions, and thus it sometimes becomes difficult to predict the future of an affected child. Decisions regarding sex assignment are made by parents with the consultation and support of their child's physicians and are individualized to each situation. Overall, this engaging, well-written book will benefit scholars and lay readers interested in the history of sex, sexuality, gender, and medicine. The book traces the evolution of what makes a person male or female and shows how the answer has changed depending on when the question was asked and where it was asked.

Dreger has succeeded in compelling the reader to ask the same question. Reviewed by Patricia Y. Fechner, M.D. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In her study of the medical response to human hermaphrodites, Alice Dreger draws on over 300 scientific and medical commentaries in France and Britain, of which over half the cases reported occurred between 1860 and 1915...As Dreger observes, there was no single opinion among doctors or the public at large about which traits were essentially male or female, or even what they might signify. In Britain, female facial hair was likely to be associated with insanity, while in France it was more likely to be seen as a mark of remarkable strength. Other interesting differences emerge...Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex is richly researched, detailed and fascinating. (Angelique Richardson Times Literary Supplement)This is a well-researched, sober history of a problem that Alice Dreger shows has directly affected more people than we might think and which shapes the sense of sexual identity of us all...Avoiding preachy judgementalism, Dreger shows how deeply ingrained are our assumptions about gender normality (sexual anatomy is destiny) and on how flimsy a basis they have been grounded. The book offers us all a lesson in self-awareness. (Roy Porter Nature)Alice Dreger ascribes the growing visibility of the hermaphrodite to Victorian anxieties about gender-blurring social phenomena, including homosexuality and feminism, as well as to improvements in medical science. During the Victorian era, Dreger argues, a greater number of women gained access to gynecological care, and as a result, infant anatomy came under more professional scrutiny; medical journals of the period, widely accessible for the first time, publicized anomalous cases. Scientific knowledge of embryological development began turning the one-time monster or marvel into, in the words of the turn-of-the-century French doctor

Xavier Delore, 'a scientific matter and a degraded organism.' (Emily Nussbaum Lingua Franca) Dreger...has found a rich mine in the clinical case histories of hermaphroditism, which outline the physicians' complex struggle to find a foolproof way of fitting individuals into a binary sexual scheme. (Laurence A. Marschall The Sciences) This engaging, well-written book will benefit scholars and lay readers interested in the history of sex, sexuality, gender, and medicine. The book traces the evolution of what makes a person male or female and shows how the answer has changed depending on when the question was asked and where it was asked. Dreger has succeeded in compelling the reader to ask the same question. (Patricia Y. Fechner New England Journal of Medicine) The historic records of [hermaphrodites]...are carefully documented by this meticulous author and merit study...To read this book is to become aware of the tremendous complexity of human sexuality and gender identity--beyond genitals, hormones, enzymes, and even chromosomes and genes. Behavior, feelings, and values blend with intellect and how each individual is sexually drawn to each other. (Domeena C. Renshaw, MD Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)) Most people have heard the term 'hermaphrodite,' but aren't quite sure what it means. [This book serves] as an introduction to that topic, bringing the voices of intersex people...into dialogue with...experts. Dreger also includes many fascinating historical photographs. Her stories of detective doctors presiding over 'doubtful-sex gatherings' show how 'again and again, consultations with fellow medical men almost invariably, rather than clearing up confusion, resulted instead in deeper and broader doubt...Medical men often discovered that too many diagnosers spoiled the certainty'...What makes [this book] important and provocative also makes [it] a little dangerous because [it] is so ahead of [its] time. (Leonore Tiefer Women's Review of Books) This is a very strange and a very good book, tackling an important topic with humanity, and in a readable style. This is a subject where biology, psychology and medical authority conflict, and where prudery, ignorance and dogmatism drive people to suicide. Dreger deals with the history of definitions of man or woman by myth and by medicine, and provides case histories, together with photographs of the problematic genitalia...As biologists, we should treasure variation--if you doubt that for human sexuality, read this book. (Jack Cohen Biologist) Through a collection of dramatic and moving medical case histories from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Dreger argues that the medical profession increasingly claimed the knowledge and authority to determine 'true' gender and to effectuate such determination by surgical means...[This] is a wonderful example that historical writing is not merely about revisiting the past, but reshaping the future. This book will prove fascinating and moving reading for those concerned with the ways in which biomedical knowledge is deployed in the service of the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality. (Vernon Rosario Harvard)

Gay and Lesbian Review)[A] perceptive, erudite and superbly-written book...Concentrating on late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain and France, Dreger analyses how defining and 'managing' hermaphroditism were crucial to the destabilization as well as a simultaneous--and only seemingly paradoxical--reinforcement of the sexual division of humanity into male and female. In a surprisingly well-integrated epilogue of the book, she establishes that present-day treatment of hermaphrodites in America, in spite of phenomenal advancements in surgical technologies and theoretical understanding of sexual physiology, continues to be guided by ideas about the nature and meaning of sex that would not have seemed unfamiliar to fin-de-siècle doctors. (Chandak Sengoopta Medical History)In her compelling, highly engaging and carefully researched book, Dreger charts the individual stories of many hermaphrodites--often with accompanying photographs...[It is] vital reading for feminists in that [it] offers detailed illustrations of scientific and medical complicity with social norms of 'sex' and 'gender', and raises important questions about how cultures enforce ideas about 'normal' bodily conditions and behaviours. (Celia Kitzinger Feminism & Psychology)Dreger has produced a well-written, lucid and sensitive account of the medical treatment of hermaphrodites from the latter half of the nineteenth century through to the present day...Dreger's description of the way modern doctors persist in assuming that they, and not the individual concerned or society, have the right to define an individual's sex are particularly illuminating. This book will be immensely interesting to historians working in this area and anyone concerned with intersexuality. (Helen Blackman Social History of Medicine)In her book, Alice Dreger sets out to convince the reader that the history of hermaphrodites, or people of ambiguous sex, is an important and interesting topic, and she more than accomplishes her goal. Not only does she deliver, but she does so with grace, ease, and compassion. This is a marvelous book, an unexpected surprise which is as readable and engaging as it is informative...Within pages of opening the book, I was enthralled. (H. Hughes Evans Journal of the History of Medicine)Traces the history of the biomedical treatment of hermaphrodites during what Dreger calls the "Age of Gonads."...She offers the reader a complex and lucid account of the process by which hermaphrodites moved from a public space (some as performers in traveling circuses and shows) to a private space where all hermaphrodite identities became increasingly shaped and defined by physicians who gained in power and prestige by intervening in the lives of these individuals...Dreger makes a convincing argument for a new approach to individuals born with ambiguous genitalia. (Heather Harris Journal of the History of Biology)Dreger has identified an important and suggestive topic, not only in the history of medicine, but for cultural history more generally. Hermaphrodites were, after all, only among the most striking members of the parade of anomalies that engaged the attention of both specialists and the general

public at the turn of the century. Any liminal creature was apt to trigger anxieties about the defense of social as well as natural boundaries, and any breach of the barriers that divided the sexes was particularly unnerving. (Harriet Ritvo, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)The casual browser who picks up this book and thinks that hermaphrodisim has nothing to do with her or him is mistaken. Dreger illuminates the process by which medicine appropriated to itself the authority first to interpret and then to 'fix' sex difference. This is a specific example of a widespread but largely invisible phenomenon, in which cultural agendas are disguised as scientific authority. The medical abuse of individuals born with atypical sex anatomy in fact serves everyone who holds the unscientific belief that the world is divided neatly into two clearly distinguished sexes. Dreger has written a book that should interest not only medical historians, professionals concerned with intersexuality, and intersexuals themselves, but everyone who thinks she knows her sex. (Cheryl Chase, Director Intersex Society of North America)In *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, Alice Dreger illuminates life stories that had been recast, subsumed, and ultimately 'disappeared' by the medical profession...Dreger's book is clearly written and easy to read. Fascinating, entertaining, disturbing, and thought-provoking all at once, it makes one ask, 'what is the difference between a male and a female?' and even more unsettling, 'why does it matter so much in our society.' (Synapse: University of California San Francisco Weekly)This fascinating book consists of numerous case studies on hermaphrodites (intersexes) and their abusive treatment by the medical and scientific community during the late 19th century and early 20th centuries in Britain and France... Dreger believes that by studying the cultural history and climate that prevailed relating to intersexuality at the turn of the last century, we may be better able to understand the concept of gender, sex, and sexuality. There are interesting sections on famous hermaphrodites and hermaphrodites in love. (H.S. Pitkow Choice)This history is important to our understanding of how the categories of "male" and "female" have come to be understood in the medical community. This history is also relevant to the current questioning of modern intersex medicine&#x85;Overall, this book is well written and considers important influences of history on the treatment of hermaphrodites that have been previously ignored. (Amy B Wisniewski, Ph.D. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*)In *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, Alice Domurat Dreger looks at the debates concerning intersexed people which circulated in the medical communities of France and Britain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In so doing, Dreger has also offered insight into our own fin-de-siÃƒÂcle quandaries about the limits of usefulness of the concepts of sex and gender as categorizations of human beings...Overall, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* is an excellent book. (Holly Devor *Journal of Sex Research* 1999-01-01)

One must understand that "Medical Invention of Sex" refers to the out-dated technique of castrating males who are not fully formed and changing them into females. Modern science waits until the "brain sex" of the child is evident and acts accordingly. A must-read for the open-minded who want to understand sexual variation.

This is a fascinating book and I am glad I read it, It has answered a great many things that puzzled me - and more. I am interested in the social history of medicine - and the role of medical professionals in decision and policy making. It demonstrates that often the mores/ awkwardness of the MD is the hurdle for the Sexually Non determinant not their own physical make up.

I think I'd said this before, Its still in the package, on the floor of my bedroom, I'm not concerned, I'll read the book when I get the chance. I don't think I'll be shocked about any of its information.....I'm an Intersex person. The old term was called Hermaphrodites, the new term is Intersex. It means both sexes, male & female. I'm also Mosaic. That means that I'm both sexes and both genders. According other research information, I've found that I'm 1:83,000, A much more Unique human. Thank You, Hugs, Bethani.

I'm in the medical field - I've been a nurse for 27 years and I've only run across 5 or 6 such individuals ala intersexual'and it's a rare, rare book indeed that can carry on such an intellectual discussion on this condition.What I learned that I valued the most is that modern western medics and nurses and parents should act in haste when encountering such a special person.Sexual ambiguity is what it is....medical people were well-meaning when they sought to correct it, but they possibly could have destroyed the true gender identity of a intersexed individual.Living in the enlightened society of today, with western modern standards, there is a lot less "fear" associated with intersexed persons.....more facination than fear anyhow.This book is very intellectual - but understandable by the average college-read person. I encourage all persons who have become aware of this 'condition' to pick up this fine book - read it - and learn a bushel-full of facts regarding hermaphrodites and the various 'forms' people come equipped with. I have only yet begun to understand that this condition may be more prevelant than ever considered before.This is a very facinating book and it comes with my highest recommendation for a truly underrepresented topic.

The history of the clinical management of intersex has previously been relegated to medical texts-

texts which illuminate technologies to "treat" intersex while ignoring the experience of the recipients of such protocols. Alice Dreger's book unveils the identities of those who heretofore have appeared in textbook photographs and illustrations with their genitals in sharp focus but with their faces obscured. In the process, Dreger reveals how medicine has often tragically subordinated what is between the patient's ears and in the patient's heart to what is between the patient's legs. While physicians would be well-served to incorporate the information and perspectives Dreger offers, the book should appeal to a far larger audience because it challenges the reader's assumption that sex is like Carvel (two flavors only) when in reality it is Baskins & Robbins.

This one's easy: 1) It's a great introduction to Intersex issues; 2) in the trans community we talk a lot about the distinction between sex and gender, and often like to mention how gender is constructed but sex isn't. This book, however, points out that sex, too, is constructed: in this case, by modern medicine; 3) it's a little more academic, sometimes is repetitive, but it's got a wealth of information.

I consider myself an "enlightened" feminist and of course I believe that gender is socially constructed, but I still had a lot to learn from this book. It's not just that gender is socially constructed, but sex itself: nothing is "natural." Nothing -- not chromosomes, genitals, nor secondary sex characteristics like breasts, facial hair, body hair, and voice -- has meaning until we ascribe it a meaning. Doctors and the medical profession have participated in the social construction of gender and sex by creating the hermaphrodite as a monstrosity that deviates from binary norms rather than as a part of a continuum of sex and gender. Dreger's book focuses on the collision of hermaphrodites with the medical profession in 19th century Britain and France, a time period when feminists and homosexuals were beginning to challenge sexual boundaries. Dreger successfully balances stories of individuals with the larger social context. Also, she never resorts to euphemisms, and the accompanying photographs are something that is missing from the standard human anatomy textbook. We should see and appreciate humanity in all its infinite variety and not force anyone to conform to a constructed "norm." Dreger's final chapter explores the plight of the intersexed in contemporary America. If we are truly to "celebrate diversity," we are going to have to become educated about the millions of intersexed in this country and become sensitive to their issues... because they are issues that concern us all.

I really learned a great deal reading this book and am more convinced than ever that people are born gay, bi or strait. We don't choose; we are born. It must have been especially hard to be born

with ambiguous genitalia back in time. The idea that there is only male and female is so archaic and hopefully will change with time. I would love to live long enough to see birth certificates and other forms without the two boxes (please check one) male or female!

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