

Women's Review *of Books*

Volume 36, Issue 2
March / April 2019

**Heather Hewett on
Raising a Trans Child**
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**Plus: Poetry, Periods,
and Patriarchal Put-Downs!**



FOR ALL WOMANKIND

Bold Lives Matter

The Bold World: A Memoir of Family and Transformation

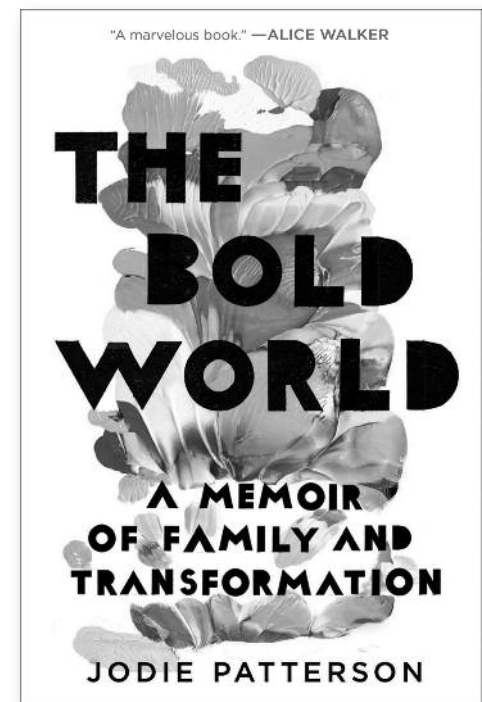
By Jodie Patterson

New York, NY; Ballantine Books, 2019, 352 pp., \$28.00, hardcover

Reviewed by Heather Hewett

Amidst the recent boom of parental memoirs about raising transgender kids, Jodie Patterson's *The Bold World: A Memoir of Family and Transformation* provides a refreshing and consequential examination of the author's experience raising her youngest son, a "boy called Penelope." Patterson, a social activist, beauty entrepreneur, and blogger, contextualizes Penelope's story in the larger narrative of her own journey—from growing up in a wealthy, community-minded African American family to attending Spelman College, moving to Brooklyn, working as a creative professional, and starting a

educated, and "actively Black household, where racial solidarity and pride ruled." Her father, a "self-made millionaire," founded the first black-owned brokerage firm on Wall Street as well as a nonprofit and a school serving neighborhoods in the South Bronx and Harlem. He pushed his two daughters to be strong and confident, making sure they felt equally at home in their Upper West Side neighborhood and Harlem. Her mother, a beautiful and talented educator, wrapped her daughters in love, teaching them how to care for their hair and "how to feel our beauty on our limbs, and discover how it sounded in our mouths." Indeed, Patterson's



child—the protests, the tantrums, the anger—that continually threw a wrench into the family's schedule. Her tunnel vision arises from her own need, as a working mom, to get through each day without everything falling apart; she simply doesn't have time for the "antics" of this "agitator." These conflicts gain clarity when one day, three-year-old Penelope asserts, "I am a boy." Patterson immediately wonders what she has done wrong. Had she failed to tell Penelope the stories of the great black women she had grown up with, the women who participated in civil rights struggles, who refused to let segregation prevent them from professional achievement, who moved mountains? "My women," as Patterson refers to them, include a great-grandmother who graduated from college and earned credits toward a Master's degree in the early 1900s, a grandmother who got her Ph.D., and an independent aunt who didn't see the need for marriage. "Having been raised to cherish being female," she writes, "I felt as if my child's rejection of that venerable symbol was my failure. The women in my family are proud of who we are, proud to be female. But my own daughter was ashamed." But when she sees how much her child is "suffering from a hurt rooted in something beyond the words immediately available to me," she decides to let go of her questions and take Penelope at his word. "And for the first time in my life as a parent," she writes, "I allowed my child to take the lead on what will come next."

Along with immersing herself in self-education about raising a transgender child, the author embarks on bringing everyone else along with her: friends and family members who need to understand that birthday presents should not include sparkly pink sneakers and need to be reminded to use masculine pronouns. And it is this work, the caregiving and emotional labor aimed at reducing the precarity of her toddler, that nearly breaks her.

Patterson excels at describing what it's like to protect and parent a transgender child:

I started to weave what I was experiencing with Penelope into every part of my existence, speaking transgender like a familiar cadence, loud and clear ... I added this big new thing into our everyday, then



Jodie Patterson and son Penelope

family with Joe Ghartey. Her debut effort is ambitious and idiosyncratic; she sprinkles black-and-white photographs of her beloved family members throughout the book and narrates the multiple stories of her child, her own life, her parents, and her extended family with mixed results. Yet *The Bold World* overwhelmingly succeeds in its commitment to talking about race as well as gender, its deep understanding of what it means to love and support human beings, and its vision of the potential for positive transformation present within each individual.

As a girl growing up in Manhattan in the 1970s, Patterson benefitted from living in a privileged,

childhood provides many of the themes that recur throughout her adult life: acknowledging the desire to be powerful and in control of her life; confronting the sexism that prevented her visionary, defiant father from allowing his wife and daughters to fully self-determine; and embracing the strength she inherits from the "fierce" women of color around her.

Patterson was the mother of four children (her oldest son, not technically "adopted," moved in with her family as a teenager) and running a SoHo beauty boutique when she gave birth to Penelope. In a chapter aptly named "Tunnel Vision," she recounts the constant struggle with her youngest



“The struggle for Patterson isn’t accepting her child. It’s learning how to fight for change without losing herself or passing out from exhaustion.”

worked to smooth it out, quickly sanding the corners and polishing the rough spots so that when Penelope walked into a room, he’d feel at ease. Like a street sweeper, I brushed dust off the roads before Penelope stepped onto them. I moved debris out of the way just before he arrived. I cleared the air before Penelope had a chance to breathe it in....

“Street sweeper” is a telling metaphor, conveying how this work is invisible, dirty, and labor-intensive. Patterson works like an advance guard, sweeping an area before her brood moves in, always on the alert for the first sign of danger. As a parent of a trans child, I find this description devastating in its precision. Most of the emotional and educational labor to support transgender kids and enable their social transition is undertaken by mothers, and it requires a healthy portion of social capital, though the scope of the work varies. Some parents remain focused on integrating their child into existing social structures; others resist the ways that binary gender organizes people, relationships, and spaces, thus transforming themselves into what scholar Ann Travers calls “accidental activists.”

Of course, Patterson has a history of social justice revolution to draw on, a perspective gained from the matriarchs in her family and the civil rights struggles of African Americans more broadly. In this sense, there’s nothing accidental about her activism. It’s a framework that enables her to embrace Penelope’s identity and connect him to her lineage: like his grandmothers before him, he demands that his voice be heard. His “declaration of self, his total dismissal of conformity and expectation” is rooted in their family. It is “elemental—etched into his DNA by his ancestors.” Her understanding of what it means to assert one’s humanity and unique individuality in the face of dehumanizing violence leads her to see the similarities between struggles: “The story of trans people,” she observes, “was shaping up to be very similar to the story of Black people, of women, of people of color all over the world.” As she puts it, others try to “rewrite people’s identities to serve their own needs”; when it comes to Penelope, for example, some people see him as “a tomboy, or a misguided girl.” But he is none of those things. He is “a boy—with a vagina.”

The struggle for Patterson isn’t accepting her child. It’s learning how to fight for change without losing herself or passing out from exhaustion.

Interdisciplinary scholarship on transgender identity, race, and history is flourishing. Over the past year, books by scholars such as Ann Travers and Tey Meadow examined the changing social landscape of gender, providing rich ethnographic data and interviews with a generation of parents who openly affirm their children’s gender nonconformity. Julian Gill-Peterson’s *Histories of the Transgender Child* delved into medical and scientific archives from the twentieth century to shed light on the presence of transgender children in earlier eras, enabling us to question contemporary media stories that treat trans kids as a “new” phenomenon. Gill-Peterson furthermore explored how nearly all of the child patients treated in clinics and hospitals were white, a demographic outcome of unequal access and race-based exclusion. Other scholars working at the intersection of history and culture asked us to consider the many ways that race has made certain (white, medicalized) trans bodies visible while obscuring others (this is from the work of Emily Skidmore), challenged us to reconsider the complex relationship between trans identity and blackness (C. Riley Snorton), and theorized the impact of violence and erasure on the lives of black trans folk in the past and at present (Snorton).

Given this history of exclusion and invisibility, it should come as no surprise that Patterson’s debut is the first widely available memoir penned by a black mother about raising a transgender black son. (As of this writing, I’ve counted ten other recently published mothering memoirs, plus one collection of short personal essays.) It would be hard to overstate the impact of Patterson’s visibility as an ally and advocate. She understands the significance of what she’s doing, given that “[a] Black family at the center of a transgender narrative holds its own unique, complicated weight.” She’s also willing to address the way that transgender issues sometimes get dismissed as “white people’s problems”—a consequence of how some members of the black community differentiate between “hard” and “soft” issues. She explains this after meeting with a friend who urges her to let go of her activism:

Hard issues are anything that can be most directly tied into the Struggle—racism, poverty, murder, education, and the everyday injustices that make steel out of our skin. Black people have always had to prioritize our circumstances. We are taught to stay

focused. To keep our eyes trained on the prize: rising up, moving forward, and ushering in another generation in better standing than the last. [...].

Everything else, then, is “white people’s problems.” These are the soft issues—issues that often deal with the emotional life, and as such should be relegated to side conversations and spoken of only behind closed doors, if at all. To talk publicly in large groups about feelings and identities and souls—to investigate our deeper, personal selves—is a privilege afforded only to the privileged. It’s a conversation that, historically, *we* just haven’t had time for. Why? Because we still exist in a time when Black lives don’t matter.

But Patterson is committed to addressing trans and black issues at the same time, because she understands how they’re connected. “If I can’t speak up, loudly, repeatedly, in any setting,” she writes, “then nothing will change. The status quo will remain of what Black boys and girls, Black men and women, Black husbands and Black wives are *expected* to be.” At moments like this, she had me standing up and cheering.

Given the courage and authenticity of Patterson’s memoir, my only complaint was that at times she doesn’t fully address her own class privilege and how that may have impacted her choices as a parent and a professional. Given her honesty about money at other moments in the memoir, I don’t think this is an intentional omission; but I do think it’s worth considering that Patterson’s intensive mothering and high-profile advocacy was likely made possible, at least in part, by the legacy of cultural and financial resources passed on to her from her forebears, not to mention the publishing and marketing networks she cultivated throughout her career in Brooklyn and Manhattan. That said, *The Bold World* reveals a fierce love and a transformative vision that deserves our full attention. Her ancestors would be proud. 📖

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