



## Society perspective on transgender *Confessions of the Fox* by Jordy Rosenberg

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### Abstract

*Confessions of the Fox* by Jordy Rosenberg is a novel that reimagines the life of the notorious thief and jail-breaker Jack Sheppard as a transgender man in 18<sup>th</sup>-century London. The novel explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, race and class in a historical context, while also challenging the conventions of historical fiction and academic scholarship. The novel is framed as a manuscript discovered and annotated by a contemporary scholar, Dr. Voth, who faces his own struggles as a transgender academic in a precarious and hostile environment. The novel thus offers a complex and nuanced perspective on transgender identity and experience, both past and present, as well as a critique of the power structures that shape and constrain human lives.

**Keywords:** Perspective, transgender, *Confessions of the Fox*, Rosenberg

### Introduction

The perception of transgender individuals among the general public exhibits significant diversity across many countries and cultures. According to statistics derived from the British Social Attitudes (BSA) poll conducted in 2019, public sentiments towards transgender individuals in the United Kingdom are mostly favorable. The poll results indicate that a significant proportion of participants hold the view that transphobia is morally unacceptable, and generally exhibit a greater prevalence of favorable attitudes towards transgender individuals compared to unfavorable ones. However, opinions might exhibit greater complexity in particular circumstances and differ according to demographic attributes. In the given instance, a diminished number of participants expressed favorable attitudes towards transgender individuals having the ability to modify the gender designation on their official birth certificate. Additionally, there existed a sense of uncertainty or mixed sentiments regarding transgender women's inclusion in shelters designated for victims of domestic abuse. Despite the presence of these differences, the prevailing attitudes towards individuals who identify as transgender have exhibited a degree of consistency or experienced a marginal decrease throughout the course of time.

In the context of the United States, there exists a multifaceted range of sentiments about transgender

individuals, which exhibit variation among different individuals. Based on a survey performed by the Pew Research Center in 2022, there exists a division among the general public over the degree to which transgender individuals have been embraced by society. Approximately 38% of participants expressed the viewpoint that society has exceeded the appropriate level of acceptance towards transgender individuals, whilst a comparable proportion of respondents (36%) stated that society's level of acceptance is insufficient. Approximately 25% of the participants expressed the sentiment that the current state of affairs has been satisfactory. It's important to note that attitudes towards transgender individuals can vary widely across different societies, and these perspectives continue to evolve over time.

The novel under consideration is "*Confessions of the Fox*" which is a historical literary novel written by Jordy Rosenberg, an American writer and transgender scholar. The story is set in eighteenth-century London and revolves around the lives of Jack Sheppard, a notorious thief and jail-breaker, and his lover Edgeworth Bess. The novel reimagines Jack Sheppard as a transgender man, exploring themes of gender, desire, and liberation.

The protagonist of the novel is Dr. Voth, a twenty-first-century scholar and transgender man who discovers a manuscript claiming to be the authentic confessions of Jack

Sheppard. As Dr. Voth transcribes and annotates the manuscript, he draws parallels between his own life and Jack's. However, he begins to question the authenticity of the manuscript when he encounters peculiar phrases and references.

The narrative delves into Jack's life as a transgender man, his quest for authenticity and freedom in a world marked by political control, surveillance, and wage work<sup>1</sup>. It explores themes such as the relationship between gender identity, rebellion, and criminality; history and knowledge through community; and the legacy of economic privatization and the modern prison system.

### **Society's perspectives on transgender individuals in the novel**

*Confessions of the Fox* by Jordy Rosenberg is a novel that reimagines the life of the notorious thief Jack Sheppard as a transgender man in 18th-century London. The novel challenges the dominant narratives of history, gender, and identity, and explores how they are shaped by power, violence, and resistance. This paper will analyze how Rosenberg uses the genre of historical fiction to critique the social and cultural constructions of transgender identity, and how he exposes the erasure and oppression of transgender people in both past and present societies. By presenting Jack Sheppard as a transgender man, Rosenberg disrupts traditional notions of gender and highlights the fluidity of identity. Through his portrayal, the novel examines the ways in which power dynamics and societal norms can marginalize and silence transgender individuals, shedding light on the ongoing struggles faced by this community. Furthermore, by drawing parallels between historical and contemporary societies, Rosenberg emphasizes the importance of recognizing and challenging the erasure and oppression faced by transgender people throughout history. London is a place of individualists. No longer busy with simple folk—sheep milling, beer being quaffed, folks picking herbs for sustenance. All gone. Now, a Body be gaoled for perambulating the town without occupation, folks afraid to walk the streets in fear of being arrested for Idleness and even the open Sewers and the trash piles prohibited—property of the newly formed Nightsoil Concerns, authorized by the Lord Mayor himself. (35)

The preacher's words reflect the rapidly changing nature of London in the 18th century. With the advent of imperialism and colonialism abroad, London and its surroundings became focused on wealth production and privatization. London once had common areas for grazing, but in the 18th century, those commons replaced with factories and wage work. This shift in understanding of common spaces and productivity is called "possessive individualism."

In the context of transgenders, the society's perspective during this period would likely be influenced by the prevailing societal norms and values. Given the conservative nature of 18th-century London, it is possible that transgenders were highly stigmatized and marginalized within society. Transgenders may have faced significant challenges in terms of acceptance and inclusion, as the concept of gender identity was not widely understood or accepted at that time. It is likely that they were subjected to discrimination and social exclusion, further exacerbating their marginalization within society. The concept of

possessive individualism may have further exacerbated this marginalization as individuals were expected to conform to traditional gender roles and identities, leaving little room for acceptance or understanding of gender diversity. Therefore, it is likely that transgender faced significant challenges in terms of social acceptance and inclusion during this time. These challenges may have manifested in various forms, such as limited access to employment opportunities, healthcare services, and legal protections. Additionally, the lack of understanding and acceptance surrounding gender diversity could have contributed to high rates of violence and harassment against transgender individuals, further deepening their marginalization within society. /

Rosenberg employs a metafictional device of framing his novel as a manuscript discovered and annotated by a contemporary transgender scholar named Dr. Voth. This allows him to create a dialogue between the historical and the contemporary, and to question the authenticity and authority of historical sources. By presenting Jack's story as a hidden and contested document, Rosenberg suggests that transgender history has been suppressed and distorted by the dominant forces of cisgenderism, colonialism, and capitalism. He also shows how Dr. Voth's own academic career and personal life are affected by the same forces, as he faces discrimination, harassment, and exploitation from his university and his ex-lover. Rosenberg thus exposes the continuity of transgender oppression across time and space, and the need for transgender solidarity and activism.

For example, one detailed example of transgender history being suppressed and distorted can be seen in the erasure of historical figures who identified as transgender. These individuals may have made significant contributions to society, but their identities and stories have often been ignored or misrepresented due to Cisgenderism and societal norms. Additionally, Dr. Voth's experience highlights how discrimination and exploitation can permeate various aspects of a transgender individual's life, including their relationships and professional opportunities, further emphasizing the urgent need for collective action and support.

There is the medical history that purports linearity (a kind of endochronology—a so-called progress narrative of the alignment of sex hormones and subjectivity, if you will). And then there is our history—fragmented and fugitive. (297) Voth conceptualizes medical history as including two distinct channels: the authorized channel of established authority and the marginalized channel of medical scientists' experimental subjects and case studies. The initial component entails a lucid and straightforward chronicle of advancement, wherein experts gradually ascertain, categorize, and investigate irregularities pertaining to the human physique and endocrine systems. The second aspect primarily represents a deficiency within the historical documentation, since the initial sexologists neglected to document their personal perspectives regarding their own bodies and encounters. Additionally, several individuals who existed on the fringes of society as gender-nonconforming individuals have left no discernible evidence of their presence. The existing disparity distorts prevailing historical narratives, favoring the lens of authority when examining the history of medicine and the human body.

From a societal perspective, the understanding and

acceptance of transgender individuals have evolved over time. With the gradual discoveries made by scientists in studying abnormalities related to the human body and endocrine systems, our knowledge about gender identity has expanded. However, there is a significant gap in historical records regarding the original sexologists and gender-nonconforming individuals who may have contributed to our understanding of gender diversity. This lack of representation has resulted in a skewed perception of history, focusing primarily on authoritative sources such as medicine, rather than acknowledging the lived experiences of marginalized gender identities.

There is the history that binds us all. The terrible history that began when the police first swarmed the streets of the cities and the settlers streamed down the decks of their ships, casting shadows on the world to turn themselves white. Casting the wickedest net. There is no trans body, no body at all—no memoir, no confessions, no singular story of ‘you’ or anyone—outside this broad and awful legacy. So when they ask for our story—when they want to sell it—we don’t let them forget. Slavery, surveillers, settlers and their shadows. [...] I’m not saying this battle was fought for you. History is not that linear. And yet, because of it, and many others like it, now you inhabit your own skin. (311)

In the latter section of the novel, Voth emphasizes the notion that one's exposure to history is not a prerequisite for its impact on their lives. Voth employs Bess's concept of sedimentation in order to construct a historical narrative that extends to the present. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness between various events, identities, and bodies, highlighting their entanglement with historical power dynamics and political conflicts that have shaped the contemporary era. The concept of history as sedimentation is clearly discernible in the composition of the document. According to Voth, the notion of a "singular story" is invalid as it fails to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of individual bodies or persons. Voth conceptualizes history as a complex and dynamic phenomenon characterized by its intricate and non-linear nature, wherein individuals find themselves perpetually entangled.

Rosenberg also uses the genre of historical fiction to reimagine the possibilities of transgender identity and expression in a different historical context. He depicts Jack as a person who defies the rigid gender norms and expectations of his society, and who finds love, freedom, and community in his relationship with Bess, a sex worker of color, and in his involvement with the criminal underworld. Rosenberg challenges the assumption that transgender identity is a modern invention or a medical condition, and instead shows how it is a complex and diverse phenomenon that has existed in different forms and cultures. He also challenges the binary and essentialist views of gender, and instead shows how it is a fluid and performative category that can be reshaped and resisted. Rosenberg thus celebrates the diversity and creativity of transgender identity and expression, and the potential for transgender agency and empowerment.

In conclusion, Society perspective on Transgenders Confessions of the Fox -Jordy Rosenberg is a novel that challenges the dominant narratives of history, gender and identity. The author reimagines the life of Jack Sheppard, a notorious eighteenth-century thief and jailbreaker, as a

transgender man who escapes the oppressive norms of his society. The novel also explores the role of the historian, who is tasked with reconstructing and interpreting the past, while grappling with his own personal and professional dilemmas. The novel invites the reader to question the assumptions and biases that shape our understanding of ourselves and others, and to celebrate the diversity and complexity of human experience.

## References

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