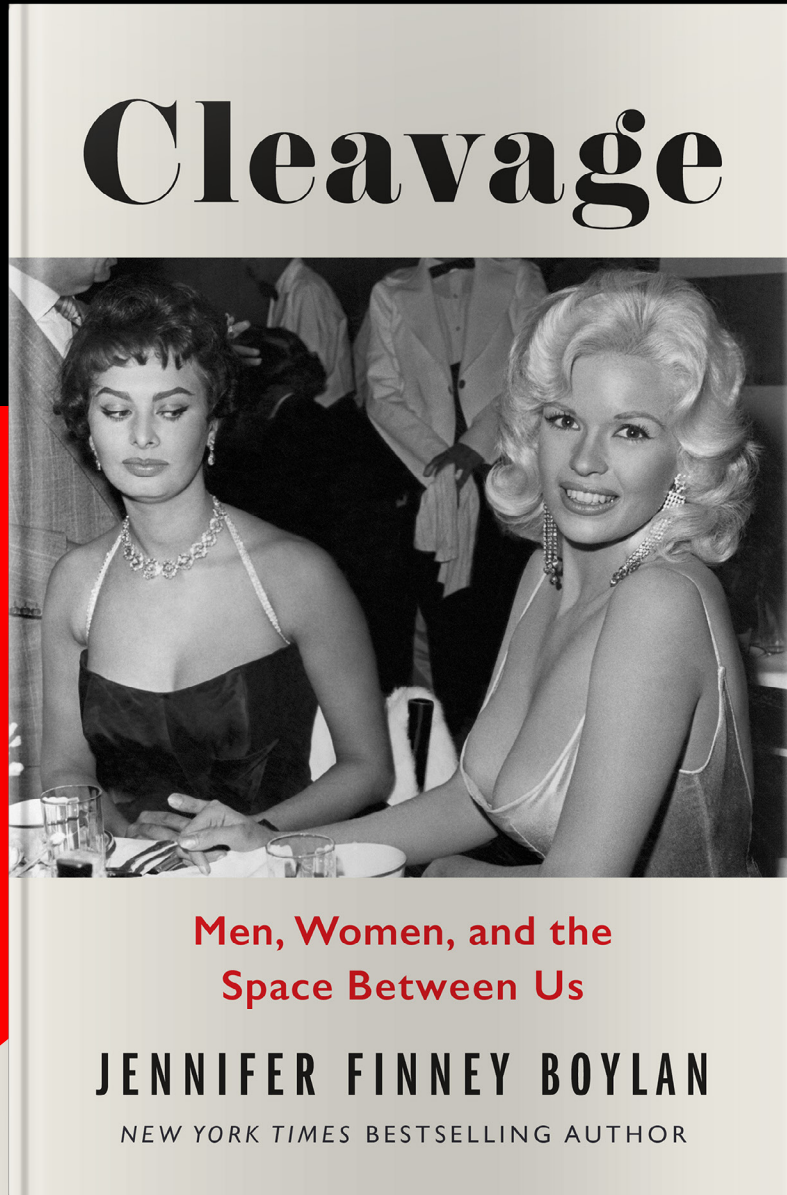


BOOK CLUB KIT



“Jenny’s honest, intense lived experience gives us a compassionate prism through which to see this changing world.”

—JODI PICOULT,

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Jenny describes this book as a “bookend” to *She’s Not There*, her 2003 memoir. Did you read that earlier book? What has changed for Jenny, and what has remained the same?
- 2 In the chapter titled “Food,” Jenny describes the way transition has altered her relationship to cooking, eating, and — most of all — her own body image. Do the women you know struggle with these issues in a different way than the men you know? In what way are these struggles different?
- 3 In the chapter titled “Voice,” Jenny talks about the desire to fit in, to “pass” as female undetected. Have you ever wanted to fit in so badly with other people that you lost part of yourself? What is gained and what is lost when we fit into a new group?
- 4 Were you surprised at Jenny’s reaction when Zai came out? How would you react if your own child — or someone else you loved — came out as trans?
- 5 In “The Heisenberg Variations” chapter, Jenny seems to suggest that the processes we go through to reinvent ourselves is similar, if not identical, to what’s involved when writers revise their work on the page? Have you ever tried to write your own story? Is it harder to revise than to invent?
- 6 In describing her friendships, Jenny seems to have decidedly different relationships with her male friends than with women. Are your friendships different depending on the sex of your friend? Would your friendship remain the same if they changed genders?
- 7 What role do you think Jenny’s sense of humor plays in her ability to survive and adapt?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 8 Did you know a lot about the lives of transgender people before you read *Cleavage*? If not, how has your opinion changed after reading the book?
- 9 Jenny describes the word “cleavage” as a contronym — that is, a word that means its own opposite. Do you think men and women are “opposites”? What opposites, or contradictions, do you think you contain?
- 10 One of the questions Jenny wrestles with is whether or not she is “the same person” before and after transition. Do you think you’d be the same person if you changed genders? What about you would change, besides the physical?
- 11 In the chapter “Shadows,” Jenny confronts the danger that she finds herself in, and that women sometimes find themselves in, in this world. If you are a woman, have you ever felt unsafe? Do you think men properly understand the sense of danger that women sometimes face?
- 12 Jenny’s wife, Deedie, seems to love her wife for who she is, not for whatever body she is packaged in. If the person you loved changed genders, would you be able to stay with them? Do you think Deedie is exceptional? Or is she simply doing what lovers do, when their loved one is in trouble?

AN INTERVIEW

WITH JENNIFER FINNEY BOYLAN



JENNIFER FINNEY BOYLAN is the author of nineteen books, including *Mad Honey*, coauthored with Jodi Picoult. Her memoir, *She's Not There*, was the first bestselling work by a transgender American. Since 2014, she has been the inaugural Anna Quindlen Writer in Residence at Barnard College of Columbia University; she is also on the faculty of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference of Middlebury College and the Sirenland Writers Conference in Positano, Italy. She is the President of PEN America, and from 2011 to 2018 she was a member of the Board of Directors of GLAAD, including four years as national cochair. In 2022-23 she was a Fellow at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She graduated from Wesleyan University and Johns Hopkins, and she holds doctorates honoris causa from Sarah Lawrence College, the New School, and Wesleyan University. For many years she was a contributing opinion writer for the opinion section of the *New York Times*. Her work has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, *Literary Hub*, *Down East*, and many other publications. She lives in Maine and New York with her wife, Deirdre. They have two children: a daughter, Zai, and a son, Sean.

In thinking back on the past decades, outwardly living as a man and then as a woman — and the transition in between — what parts of your life changed the most in relation to your perceived gender?

The biggest difference is not going from man to woman; the biggest difference is going from a person who has a secret to a person who doesn't.

There are certainly many things that I experience differently now — for one thing, tears are very close to the surface, and things that used to just bounce off me now get under my skin and stay there. For another, I think about food, and my weight, constantly now, whereas in the days before the old switcheroo, I never did. We didn't even own a scale. Now, to my shame, I find myself thinking about calories, and what I can eat, and how many martinis I can drink before I have to start skipping breakfast again. It's not something I'm proud of, but it's there.

And my experience of time itself, I think, has changed: I used to always be looking into the future, planning my next project, my next conquest, my next move. Now I spend more time enjoying the moment, or even thinking about various

memories. I feel like I remember everything now; it's impossible to experience anything without it resonating with things that have happened in the past.

But it may be that this isn't the difference between a man and a woman, but instead is the difference between a young person and an old one. There are other things that have changed, too — my relationships with my friends is more intimate; my voice has changed in all sorts of ways; and even my writing, I think, is profoundly different now. But like I said, the big thing is not about gender, but about being able to live my life honestly and openly, without secrets, without shame.

What remained the same?

I think my fundamental sense of self is the same. My wife once described me by saying “Same monkeys, different barrel.” I still tell the same jokes; I still love the same people. And my sense of music has remained the same, both as a performer and as a listener. I love Bach, Mozart, Copeland, Vivaldi, Beethoven, and the Grateful Dead. Some of my friends had hoped that estrogen would alter the genetic predisposition toward Jerry Garcia, but they hoped in vain. I'm still down with all that joyful noise.

What lessons do you hope readers take from *Cleavage*?

I hope that people will understand the humanity of other men and women a little better, and trans people in particular. And I hope that the story of my marriage to Deedie — whom I called “Grace” in *She's Not There* — will provide a lesson on how people can love each other even as they both morph and change over time. We know from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, among other great texts, that none of us is only one thing. And over time, none of us stay the thing that we were when we began. The journey of life is to accept change, in others and in ourselves. And so I hope that *Cleavage* shines a light on the way change makes us who we are and that embracing change with humor, and curiosity, and love is a key to a life well lived.

If you decide to adopt ***Cleavage*** for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at reader@celadonbooks.com or post on social media using the hashtags #CeladonBookClub and #ReadCleavage.



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