



---

## THE DANISH GIRL

by David Ebershoff

### Contents

About David Ebershoff .....	2
A conversation with David Ebershoff .....	2
Reviews.....	7
Some suggested points for discussion .....	11
Further reading .....	11

## About David Ebershoff

David Ebershoff was born in Pasadena, California and is a graduate of Brown University and the University of Chicago. He has also studied at Keio University in Tokyo. He currently lives in New York City where he is the Publishing Director of the Modern Library, a division of Random House.

*The Danish Girl* is Ebershoff's first novel. He spent two years writing it during his vacations from Random House and made headlines when the unfinished novel created a bidding war between five interested publishers. Viking won the rights for a reported US\$350 000 two-book deal, which also included publishing his first collection of short stories. *The Danish Girl* has racked up an impressive sale of foreign rights, with eleven countries publishing translations of the novel. Several film studios and actors have also expressed interest in the film rights, including DreamWorks, Angelina Jolie, and *Ally McBeal* co-star, Gil Bellows.

Ebershoff's new work, *The Rose City* (published by Allen & Unwin in August 2001) combines vivid characters with Ebershoff's trademark emotional insight and lush prose in seven stories about young men and boys making their way in a chaotic world. He is currently writing his second novel, *Pasadena*.

## A Conversation with David Ebershoff

### How did you discover the story of Einar, Greta, and Lili?

A few years ago, a friend who works at a university press mailed me a book about gender theory that his press was publishing. I took it home and casually began to flip through it. Not much of a reader of theory, I didn't expect to like the book. And I was right—too much discussion of literary constructs and not enough of character, story, and plot, the notions that really get a novelist going. But buried in the book, parenthetically in fact, was a short paragraph about Einar Wegener, the first person ever to undergo a successful sex change. I had always thought that Christine Jorgensen, an American GI from Brooklyn, had been the first man to surgically change into a woman. Something in this tangential paragraph—it mentioned that Wegener was a painter and that his wife had helped him in his transformation—made me curious. Why was this man forgotten from history? Who was he? Who was his wife? How did such a change affect their marriage?

Curious, I went to the New York Public Library and began to search for references to Einar Wegener. I found none in my first attempt. So I turned to books about gender and sexual identity, and that was where the name Lili Elbe first came up in connection to Einar Wegener. A number of references, short and often contradictory, ultimately led me to Lili Elbe's diaries and correspondence, which were published in 1933, soon after her death. This is where my true research began.

### **How did you research the facts that are left to us?**

In some ways writing a novel, especially a novel set in the past and about characters who once lived, is about amassing enough details and arranging them properly in order to offer the reader a verisimilitude that satisfies his or her curiosity about the story at hand. And yet all of this must be done in a voice and style that makes the story the novelist's own. *The Danish Girl* was written with the assistance of the staffs at five libraries, each of which provided me invaluable sources about the novel's subjects and places: the Royal Danish Library; the library at the Dresden Hygiene Museum; the New York Public Library; and the Pasadena public Library.

Some of the most important references for the novel include the news reports on Wegener's transformation that appeared in the Danish press in 1930 and 1931, especially those in *Politiken* and *Nationaltidende*, which I read on microfiche at the Royal Library in Copenhagen. In 1931 Lili Elbe set out to explain her life to the public, cooperating on a series of essays in *Politiken*. She had a friend who was the editor at the newspaper who allowed her to pen the articles as if they were written by a third person. These essays told the world about Einar's gradual evolution from married man and prominent artist to young woman, and the doctor in Dresden who performed the three surgeries. Months after these essays ran, in a final gesture to Lili Elbe's fantastic story, *Politiken* published Lili's obituary under the by-line of Fru Loulou, although much suggests that Lili wrote the article herself; hence, Lili, in characteristic fashion, scripted the last words the world would read about herself.

Shortly after Lili Elbe died in 1931, a friend of hers, Niels Hoyer, edited her diaries and correspondence and published them in a book under the title *Fra Mand Til Kvinde* (Man into Woman). The diary was an invaluable source of information about Einar Wegener and Lili Elbe, especially about the transformation, his stay at the Dresden Municipal Women's Clinic, and the medical procedures and examinations performed on him. The diary also gave me clues of where to look for other information: the Royal Academy of Art and the neighbourhood around Nyhavns

Kanal, the radium institute in Rungsted, the rural bog-villages of Jutland where Einar grew up, the medical clinics in Paris and Dresden.

### **Why do you think the story of Einar and Greta was forgotten?**

One could speculate forever why the story was nearly forgotten. Wegener underwent his surgeries in the early 1930s, a time of great anxiety in the world, especially the parts of Western Europe where he lived—Copenhagen, Paris, and Dresden. The dark cloud of economic disaster, fascism and, eventually, Nazism had already rolled over the continent. It does not surprise me that that story was lost in the horrible events of the subsequent fifteen years. That is one reason. Yet, of course, another reason is the nature of Wegener's transformation. Even today transgendered people struggle to incorporate themselves into society, without much assistance from most of us. But in the 1930s the story was almost too much to absorb: not only was the world hearing for the first time about a person with a jumbled state of gender, the headlines were also shouting that gender switching was now medically possible. Around the world newspapers reported Wegener's transformation with a mixture of awe and judgement. It was a big story at the time, but when Lili Elbe died, even the most sympathetic newspapers in Copenhagen reported it as more of a footnote than as a summary of a remarkable event. But Lili Elbe made her best attempt to keep her head above the closing waters of history with her obituary in *Politiken*.

### **What inspired you about this story to make it the subject of your first novel?**

Marriage fascinates me: how we negotiate its span, how we change within it, how it changes itself, and why some relationships survive themselves and other do not. There isn't a single marriage that couldn't provide enough narrative arc for a novel. As I see it, the heart of the story of Einar, Lili, and Greta lies not in the sex change but in the intimate space that made up their marriage. They were in love across several years, even when they lived as two women. What kind of relationship can withstand a shift like that? Put simply, it is the question that we perpetually ask ourselves: what is love?

Something else I came to understand when I began to read about Einar Wegener and Lili Elbe is that we all, in some ways, are born into the wrong body. We struggle throughout our lives to learn to accept the shell that transports us through this world. I believe everyone has at least once looked in the mirror and thought, 'That is not who I am. I was meant to be someone else.' Obviously most of us do not take such drastic measures to come to terms with who we are, but there is universality to Einar's question of identity—look not at my body, look at my soul.

## **How much of *The Danish Girl* is based on fact? Why did you choose at times to stray from the facts—especially with the ending?**

Some of the basic events of Einar's transformation are based on fact—the first time he dresses as Lili, the mysterious bleeding, the stay at the Dresden Municipal Clinic, for example. But most of the novel is invented. I wanted to write a love story, the novel about Einar and Greta's marriage. To do so required speculation and imagination of how they lived, how they worked together, how they fought, how they loved each other. In *The Danish Girl* I changed many parts of their story in order to write a love story with its own logic. Probably one of the greatest changes I made was making Greta (whose real name was Gerda) an American. She is the hero of my novel, in my opinion. In order to convey the depth of her love for her husband, and then for Lili, I felt the need to invent a new character with a history that helps to inform how she approaches her marriage to Einar. The end of the novel is an extension of all of this. In my ending I needed to resolve their marriage—this after all is what the novel is about. In reality, Gerda Wegener and Lili Elbe drifted apart, which seemed nearly implausible and hopelessly sad, after all they had done for each other.

## **What challenges were involved in creating a character that begins as a man and ends as a woman?**

The most interesting part of imagining such a character was thinking about past and present. The past plays a great role in the novel, as it does in most fiction. But what intrigues me was whose past it was. When Einar was living as Lili, whose childhood was remembered, which memories both physical and emotional belonged to Einar, to Lili, and to both? Einar Wegener entered the Dresden Municipal Women's Clinic in the spring of 1930, and several months later Lili Elbe exited it. What happened to Einar's past—all his fondness and regret and frustrations and remembered dreams? How would I account for that?

In reality, Einar Wegener truly felt that he did a full switch from man to woman; that with the blade of a knife he went from male to female as efficiently as you or I turn on or off the light to a room. But I believe this was simplistic of him. My understanding of what happens in the transformation is different. I believe, and this is another reason I wrote this story as fiction, that Einar was both man and woman, not one or the other, and that living his life as either would never have been exactly correct. Physically this was true—he had physical characteristics of both men and women. But more important, his psyche and his spirit belonged to both genders, perhaps not equally, but even after the operation Lili was not entirely female. How could she have been? She

thought she was, but that was not the case. Certainly writing about a person who is both male and female is a challenge, but in the best sense because of the possibilities.

**Greta is a fascinating character. Why does Greta encourage Einar to crossdress? What motivates her and how does she reconcile these motives with the pain it also causes her?**

Greta possesses an unusual combination of independence and fidelity. She is self driven and fiercely individual, yet at the same time she holds a profound sense of dedication to the two men she marries, especially Einar. She will do anything for him. She knows him better than he knows himself and recognises even before Einar that he responds to dressing as a woman. Greta encourages Einar to live as Lili because she knows it is what Einar wants—and that is always enough of a reason for Greta. Except nothing is ever that simple. Greta’s career takes off with her paintings of Lili. She needs Lili as much as Einar. And I believe Greta is never fully honest with herself or her husband about how Lili has changed her life as an artist. Einar could not have become Lili without Greta, but Greta could not have become the artist of her ambitions without Lili. Their motives and actions are snarled and inextricable.

**How did writing this book affect your views on the choices of the transgendered?**

Writing the novel gave me a new understanding of courage. And seventy years after Lili Elbe made her historically courageous decision, it still requires nearly super-human courage to decide to proceed with a sex change. This is changing, gradually, slowly. It requires a faith that you can turn your world on its head and yet still emerge with a sense of yourself intact. How many of us are strong enough to do something like that?

***The Danish Girl* is about a lot more than the story of the first transsexual. What do you hope readers will be left with when they read this novel?**

Whom do we love and why do we love them, and how do we love them. And what do we do to help and harm that love—a better understanding of all that is, ultimately, what I hope a reader thinks about when the last page has been read. Those questions, and: there once lived a brave man with a beautiful wife and a mysterious Danish girl, and their story, their marriage, their individual and joint transformations, are worthy of our memory.

## Where can we learn more about Lili Elbe and Einar Wegener?

My Web site, [www.ebershoff.com](http://www.ebershoff.com), has information about the real story of Lili and Einar, including photographs and paintings, as well as information about the film version of *The Danish Girl*.

## Reviews

### **Sydney Star Observer—Jameson Currier** **Looking at *The Danish Girl*: forgotten facts from the early days of** **transsexual history**

‘I always thought Christine Jorgensen was the first transsexual and based on that I went to the library and began to research the details,’ Ebershoff says. He explains that one of the reasons why Christine Jorgensen’s case has eclipsed the notoriety of Lili Elbe is due, in part, to the timing of Elbe’s sex-change operations. ‘Right after this came a terrible period in world history that swallowed up this story,’ he says.

Transsexual historian Candice Brown Elliott notes that another reason was that in Christine Jorgensen’s case she survived her surgeries for three decades, whereas Elbe did not. Nonetheless, Elliott points out that Lili Elbe became a sort of underground legend. ‘The reason the press forgot her is that her story became a dead end,’ Elliott says. ‘The two clinics where she was seen, the Dresden Women’s Clinic and the Institute for Sexology in Berlin, were shut down by the Nazis in 1933’ . . . transsexuals in Germany were among the first to be rounded up and put into prisons and concentration camps. Sexologist Magnus Hirschfield tried to restart the Institute in Paris but the French were not supportive; he died in 1935. ‘No one could follow in Lili’s footsteps for twenty years,’ Elliott says, ‘not until Harry Benjamin, another German Jew and a personal friend of Hirschfield since 1908, started helping transsexuals in the US in 1949.’

In creating *The Danish Girl*, Ebershoff has meticulously detailed the landscapes of Copenhagen, Dresden, and Paris of this era but he has also chosen to change or omit many facts and characters. The two children Einar reportedly fathered are not mentioned in the novel, but even more significant is the alteration of the Danish-born artist Gerda Wegener into Greta Wegener, an American ‘orange heiress’ from Pasadena, California, who emigrates to Denmark to become a painter. Ebershoff, also a native of Pasadena, says this Americanisation was his way of sending a ‘very strong signal that this is a novel’. Einar also becomes Greta’s second husband; prior to settling in Europe, she has left behind another tragic romance.

‘I wanted the story to resonate with a lot of readers and it seemed that an American character would help with that,’ he says. ‘Greta was sort of bursting through my keyboards into the book. This character was coming from somewhere and she seemed very alive and I wanted to fit her in. And she helped balance out the characters of Einar and Lili—they were very different personalities.’

In *The Danish Girl* one doctor diagnoses Einar as schizophrenic and another doctor suggests he undergo a lobotomy (a new procedure at the time). But Ebershoff has also chosen to consolidate several medical professionals involved in the factual story as well as Lili’s actual surgeries—many of which were of an experimental nature during this period.

‘There were a lot of doctors involved,’ he says. ‘And I very consciously decided to limit the amount of the book that was about the actual transformation. Her time was not accepting and Lili was told by several physicians that she was crazy and to straighten up, to be a man. But like thousands of other transsexuals, she kept on with her life.’

According to Elliott, Dr Warnekros, who headed the Dresden Women’s Clinic, was visiting Paris when a woman friend of Elbe’s introduced them to one another. After consulting on the case, Warnekros invited Elbe to come to Berlin to be examined at the Institute for Sexology. She met with Hirschfield at Warnekros’s request, for a second opinion.

In Berlin she had her first operation, the removal of her male genitals. Then, when sufficiently recovered, she went to Dresden where Dr Warnekros performed further surgery, which included transplanting healthy ovaries into her abdomen. Several other surgical procedures were involved, including an emergency surgery, due to abdominal pain, which is believed to have been the removal of the rejected ovaries.

The original story also ended much more tragically than Eberhoff’s poignant and lyrical final moments in *The Danish Girl*. Details about Elbe’s actual death vary. Some reports say she may have faked her death in 1931 and that she wrote her own obituary. Others believe she may have died a few months after her fifth operation, an operation she hoped would allow her to have intercourse with a man to whom she was engaged to be married. Gerda died in 1940 after remarrying in 1933.

### **Courier-Mail—Judith Lukin-Amundsen To have and to hold**

There is something about this novel that may remind readers of Elizabeth Knox’s *The Vitner’s Luck* or Magnus Mills’s *The Restraint of Beasts*, or Charlotte Wood’s *Pieces of a Girl*. It’s a quality of

extraordinariness. Of an astonishing idea, rendered arrestingly: a hypnotising uniqueness of content-plus-form.

In its simplest terms, this novel is a delineation of gender identity. Yet this lovely book is also, even more, a portrait of every marriage. For it is within the frame—both the time-frame and the intimate shape—of Einar and Greta’s marriage that Einar’s identity as Lili comes to light, bringing up into high relief the events, requirements and growth of virtue that marriage engenders.

Ebershoff’s writing has strange qualities. To quote one sentence or paragraph alone would not at all give a sense of the cumulative—almost cumulous—delicacy of feeling it transmits, giving the book a weird beauty. From an initial feeling of awkwardness, the story sweeps off like a fresh creature into a waltz. Although written in English by an American, the novel has, oddly, that seemingly simple style of a European novel in translation.

It is mesmerisingly and mysteriously seductive. *The Danish Girl* is an anatomy of tragedy and joy. Greta’s loving paintings of Lili are a mainstay of the novel. They are too about communication, huge gentleness, tremendous kindness and paired fortitude.

When Einar, longing to become Lili, goes to see the ambiguous Professor Bolk in Dresden, the reader begins to feel uneasy. By the time of their next encounter in the 1930s, outrage, compassion and fright have become an uncomfortable mix for both Greta and Lili.

The painter Jeffrey Smart recently spoke of ‘a great ugliness in our modern world . . . indifference and too much tolerance—which can be another form of indifference’. He said what matters most is ‘love, personal love’. This is a book about love. And it is a loving book, written with great attention.

### ***The Press (NZ)*—Sally Blundell Intrigue of metamorphosis**

‘Seldom,’ says the blurb, ‘has the delicate question of sexual identity been more subtly probed . . .’ Subtle it is. With such delicacy does the author touch the subject that the main protagonists are mere shadows. The depth of emotion arising from the fervency, passion, and tragedy of this story of ‘a little girl born as a boy on the bog’ is left unsaid. Instead we are left wondering whether the transformation is met with joy, fear or an almost vague academic curiosity in Einar Wegener.

We wonder how Greta feels. Considering her support of his desire to acknowledge the woman within, we are told, ‘She thought to herself, although not in so many words, “What have I done to my husband?”’

This dull-booted foray into the minds of characters may explain why the author keeps to the safer perspective of a distant voyeur. Such a subject deserves a more perceptive, braver, hand. Subtlety is a lame excuse for sidestepping the emotional depths of this story.

Yet, for a sense of intrigue and sheer curiosity as to how the intrepid Professor Bolk is going to achieve the transformation, *The Danish Girl* offers a thoughtless, rather than thoughtful, journey into oh-my-god territory.

### ***Australian Doctor*—Suzanne Hall Never judge a book by its cover**

Appearances are deceptive. With David Ebershoff's promising debut novel the ambiguity begins with the title.

Another misleading aspect of the novel is its classification as a love story. It is more about the realisation of self-identity. And when Einar swaps his trousers for stockings and heels, he is not the only one to make a self-discovery. Greta—who had previously painted formal portraits for the walls of the semi-famous and semi-influential—finds Lili to be the inspirational subject who brings her widespread fame and respect within art circles in Paris.

Her discovery of the elusive perfect subject may help to explain her sometimes baffling and unquestioning love for her husband/Lili—not that her confusion is totally glossed over. Greta's uncertainty about her role in the relationship is perhaps best captured early in the novel in the line: 'Should she kiss Lili as she might kiss her husband?'

But the novel is also about the sacrifices caused by Lili's emergence. Greta loses her husband, and Einar, a once renowned landscape artist, abandons his pallet and brushes as Lili.

Despite its rich prose, the novel at times leaves the reader unconvinced, and ends a little too conveniently with too much emotional detachment to be believable.

### ***Ballarat Courier*—Nina Valentine**

This is a truly remarkable book, though it is not for the faint-hearted. It deals with the first recorded sex change operation in the world, and is therefore based on fact. Ebershoff tells us that we should not look to his novel for true details of Einar Wegener's life. What we will find is a fictional depiction of the elements of that extraordinary life, using only the bones of the facts as buttresses. But what buttresses they prove to be.

Because David Ebershoff demonstrates an ability to write superbly, the areas which might prove confronting are not. When Einar is evolving into the persona of Lili Elbe, the sensitive brush strokes are refined even further. It is difficult to believe that this is Ebershoff's first novel, for he is so deft in use of words to create precisely what he wants to convey, and he has structured the novel brilliantly taking the reader back and forth with effortless ease.

## Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ Ebershoff says the central theme of *The Danish Girl* is the question 'What do you do when the person you love changes?' Who do you think must cope with the most change, Einar or Greta?
- ◆ How did you react to Greta's decision to support Einar and his desire for a sex change operation? Is this a story of a woman's love, who thinks nothing of sacrificing her own happiness in order to please her husband? Would Einar have become Lili without Greta's help?
- ◆ What is happening to Einar when he goes to Mme Jasmin-Carton's and dances for the man? How does this influence his full metamorphosis into Lili?
- ◆ Why doesn't Lili pack Einar's paintings to take with her to New York? What do the paintings symbolise for Lili?
- ◆ How much does the last operation mean to Lili, in terms of becoming a complete woman? Should she have risked it?

## Further reading

*The Rose City* by David Ebershoff