As Nature Made Him
The Boy who was Raised as a Girl

By John Colapinto

ABOUT THE BOOK

It is hard to believe that As Nature Made Him isn’t fiction. The story John Colapinto presents here is thick with human drama and fateful coincidences. There’s a freak snowstorm in April, a freak medical accident that resulted in an infant losing his penis, and a seemingly villainous doctor angling to prove his own gender theories. Readers meet a young couple agonizing over their son’s injury while struggling to mend their fractured family. Most importantly, there is the child who – against all odds – breaks through his tragic past to become a man whose courage will not soon be forgotten. That man is David Reimer – baptized as Bruce. After losing his penis in a botched circumcision he was raised until the age of 14 as a girl named Brenda. The doctor is John Money – the high profile sex researcher at Johns Hopkins Hospital who, when approached by Ron and Janet Reimer for a second opinion about their son’s injury, rushed to their side with a controversial course of action.

For years, Dr. Money had been asserting that an individual’s gender identity is determined not by the hormones that bathe a developing fetus’ brain and nervous system, but by socialization. David Reimer’s tragedy presented him with the perfect opportunity to prove his theory. There were two reasons for this: David was born with intact male genitalia (as opposed to hermaphrodites), and he had a twin brother against whom Dr. Money could measure his development as a girl. At the time of Bruce’s accident, phalloplasty (penile reconstruction) was not a viable medical option. And so the decision was made, Bruce became “Brenda.”

For fourteen years David Reimer’s family, along with Dr. Money and several other physicians, struggled to convince David that – in body, mind, and soul – he was a girl. It is through the lens of this extraordinarily painful experience that John Colapinto tells two important stories. The first examines John Money, his motives, and the medical establishment that failed to confirm that the ethics surrounding David Reimer’s treatment were sound. The second story is David Reimer’s. It is a heartrending account of living with an unwanted sex role, of loneliness, of stigmatization, of soul-searching, and finally, of astounding courage. In the end, it is that story that should not be forgotten. As Nature Made Him should spur each reader to remember and accept who they are, and to challenge those individuals who might tell them otherwise.

Topics for Discussion

The "nature versus nurture" issue is one of the most hotly debated topics today. Other than being of interest to the scientific and medical community, why is it so important to society at large? How could the outcome of this debate affect public policy?
Before reading *As Nature Made Him*, did you have an opinion about the role of hormones in the formation of our gender identities? What was it? Did this book change your point of view? How and why?

John Colapinto included explicit details not only about the actual circumcision, but also about "Brenda's" painful coming-of-age. What effect did this have on you? Do you think he could have included less detail without diluting the impact of the book?

What narrative techniques did the author use that you found particularly effective in setting the tone of the book and in making the account powerful?

How did you feel about John Colapinto's depiction of John Money and the medical community? Was it fair? Why or why not?

Did reading *As Nature Made Him* change your opinion about sexual reassignment? Were you even aware of it as a medical issue before reading the book? If so, where had you read or heard about it?

Consider the formation of your own sexual identity. Discuss what makes you feel like a man or a woman, and how society has played a role in building gender identity, both in general and in your own life.

*About the Author*: John Colapinto's articles have appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Mademoiselle*, *US*, and *Rolling Stone*. *As Nature Made Him* is based on a landmark article published by *Rolling Stone* that won the National Magazine Award. He lives in New York City with his wife and son.