

# Redefining Realness

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

*My  
Path to  
Womanhood,  
Identity,  
Love & So  
Much More*

**"Courageous! This  
book is a life map for  
transformation."**

**—bell hooks**

*Janet Mock*



# Redefining *Realness*



*My Path to Womanhood,  
Identity, Love & So Much More*

JANET MOCK

**ATRIA** BOOKS

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You become strong by doing the things you need to be strong for. This is the way genuine learning takes place. That's a very difficult way to live, but it also has served me. It's been an asset as well as a liability.

—AUDRE LORDE

# Author's Note

This book is my truth and personal history. I have recalled facts, from events to people, to the best of my ability. When memory failed me, I did not seek answers in imagination. I sought clarity through conversations with those who've shared experiences with me. When my recollection of events varied from theirs, I sided with my memory and used their voice, often direct quotes, to contextualize events.

Many people featured in the book gave me permission to use their names; others I changed or labeled with an initial to protect their privacy, whether they were guilty, innocent, indifferent, or somewhere in between.

As for terminology, I prefer to use *trans* over *transgender* or *transsexual* when identifying myself, although I don't find either offensive. I do not use *real* or *genetic* or *biological* or *natural* to describe the sex, body, or gender of those who are not trans. Instead, I've used *cis*, a term applied to those who are not trans and therefore less likely to experience the misalignment of their gender identity and assigned sex at birth—a matter we do not control, yet one that continues to frame who is normalized or stigmatized.

Finally, though I highlight some of the shared experiences of trans women and women of color throughout this book, it was not written with the intent of representation. There is no

universal women's experience. We all have stories, and this is *one* personal narrative out of untold thousands, and I am aware of the privilege I hold in telling *my* story. Visit [JanetMock.com](http://JanetMock.com) for more information, resources, and writings.

# Introduction

I was shopping for dresses I didn't need at a vintage store near my apartment when I read the e-mail that changed my life. It was May 13, 2011, and the message—titled “Drum roll please . . . *Marie Claire*”—contained a three-page PDF of what would become known as my “coming-out story.” “I hope you like it,” the editor of my profile wrote. “We are very pleased with it. Very proud of it.”

I downloaded the file on my iPhone and read the article for the first time, seated on a curb outside the boutique. It was a brisk and sunny Friday in the East Village, one of those days that hadn't decided what season it wanted to be. My palms were moist and my heartbeat was hasty as my eyes glided across twenty-three hundred words written by journalist Kierna Mayo. I read the article three times from the same spot on that cold cement. After each reading, I was moved but strikingly detached.

It was a stranger's story to me. It belonged to some brave girl who defied all odds, crossing sexes, leaving her past behind, making it to *People* magazine, and living to tell her story in a major women's magazine. I found myself applauding this heroine for embodying the do-it-yourself bravado that Americans celebrate. Although the facts correlated with my life, the story belonged to *Marie Claire* through the reportage of Kierna. The profile was a compilation of a series of meetings,

phone calls, and e-mails from the past few months that disclosed one aspect of my identity: I am a trans woman, or, as *Marie Claire* put it, “I Was Born a Boy.” The fact remains that the girl in that article didn’t resonate with me because it wasn’t really *my* story.

When Kierna approached me back in 2010, only the people closest to me knew I was trans: my family, my friends, and my boyfriend. They were people I trusted, who nurtured me, with whom I was intimate. I took Kierna’s call because a friend to whom I had opened up told me I could trust Kierna. This friend was the same person who had disclosed to a well-known journalist what I’d shared with her in confidence. Regardless, I was not ready for the vulnerability that comes with public openness when I spoke to Kierna at age twenty-seven. During our conversations, I withheld parts of myself and details from my journey (partly because I was unpacking my own shame; partly because I needed to save those details for my own story). As a result, the girl in the piece seemed untouchable, unscathed, a bit of an anomaly.

I was reluctant to open up to the world for the same reasons I had been afraid to reveal myself as Janet to my mother and siblings at thirteen, to wear a dress through the halls of my high school, to tell the man I loved my truth: I didn’t want to be “othered,” reduced to just being trans. I struggled for years with my perception of what trans womanhood was, having internalized our culture’s skewed, biased views and pervasive misconceptions about trans women.

Growing up, I learned that being trans was something you did not take pride in; therefore, I yearned to separate myself from the dehumanizing depictions of trans women that I saw in

popular culture, from Venus Xtravaganza's unsolved and underexplored murder in *Paris Is Burning*, to the characters of Lois Einhorn (played by Sean Young) in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, and Dil (played by Jaye Davidson) in *The Crying Game*, to numerous women exploited as modern-day freak shows on *Jerry Springer* and *Maury*. Let's not forget the "tranny hooker" credits seen everywhere from *Sex and the City* to every *Law & Order* and *CSI* franchise. According to the media, trans women were subject to pain and punch lines. Instead of proclaiming that I was not a plot device to be laughed at, I spent my younger years internalizing and fighting those stereotypes.

*I don't want to be seen as one of them*, I told myself a number of times as I grappled with making the decision to tell my story publicly. I remained silent because I was taught to believe that my silence would protect me, cradle me, enable me to have access, excel, and build a life for myself. My silence and my accomplishments would help me navigate the world without others' judgments and would separate me from the stereotypes and stigma.

As I remained silent, though, I became aware of the fact that behind these limited media images and society's skewed perceptions, there were *real* girls out there. I knew these girls. I'd grown up with them in Honolulu and passed them on the streets of New York. These girls and women were not given the same opportunities and concessions with which I'd been blessed. They were dismissed and dehumanized, which made an overwhelming majority of them vulnerable to the harshest treatment, exclusion, discrimination, and violence. These women stood at the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and personal economy on the margins of our society. Despite my



attempt to remain separate and be the exception, the reality was that I was one of these women.

I had to be honest with myself about the totality of my experiences, and opening up to the world—even if the story disclosed only a facet of my journey—was a gift. It wasn't a gift just to the hundreds of women who've thanked me for stepping forward; it's the greatest gift I've ever given myself. In the three years since I read that PDF on the curb, my story has been embraced by people from all walks of life. I've had the opportunity to share space with folks around the country, speaking about my experiences of privilege and oppression, my mission to be unapologetic about the layered identities I carry within my body, and reclaiming the often erased legacy of trans women's survival that enabled me to thrive as a young, poverty-raised trans woman of color. I exist because of the women who came before me, whose work, lives, and struggles I've greatly benefited from. Whether it was 1966's Compton's Cafeteria riots or the Stonewall uprisings of 1969 or the daily battles against policing, exiling, violence, and erasure, trans women—specifically those from the streets with nothing to lose—always resisted. My foremothers have role modeled, through their lives and work, the brilliance of anchoring yourself in marginalized womanhood.

The responsibility that comes with being visible is a duty, one I'm still growing comfortable with. I have been lauded as a voice, a leader, and a role model. I know intimately what it feels like to crave representation and validation, to see your life reflected in someone who speaks deeply to whom you know yourself to be, echoes your reality, and instills you with possibility. That mirror wasn't accessible to me growing up. It

was an utterly lonely place to be. So when a girl with tears in her eyes embraces me and tells me “I want to be like you when I grow up” or “Reading your story has given me hope” or “You’re my hero,” I understand the gravity of her statements.

My story has shown that *more* is possible for girls growing up like I did. I’m proud of that, yet I struggle with being held up as the one who “made it,” as an exception to the rule. For years, exceptionalism was a bandage I proudly wore to make me feel worthy. I felt validated when people stated that I was *exceptional* or *unique* or that I was not the norm. Basking in these proclamations, I soon realized something was amiss: If I’m the exception, the so-called standard of success, then where does that leave the sisters I grew up with on the streets of Honolulu who didn’t “make it”?

Being exceptional isn’t revolutionary, it’s lonely. It separates you from your community. Who are you, really, without community? I have been held up consistently as a token, as the “right” kind of trans woman (educated, able-bodied, attractive, articulate, heteronormative). It promotes the delusion that because I “made it,” that level of success is easily accessible to all young trans women. Let’s be clear: It is not.

We need stories of hope and possibility, stories that reflect the reality of our lived experiences. When such stories exist, as writer and publisher Barbara Smith writes, “then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream.” We must also deconstruct these stories and contextualize them and shed a light on the many barriers that face trans women, specifically those of color and those from low-income communities, who aim to reach the not-so-extraordinary things I have grasped: living freely and without threat or notice as I am, making a safe,

healthy living, and finding love. These things should not be out of reach.

Having “made it” leaves me with survivor’s guilt. I often go home after delivering a keynote or appearing on television and pull the lashes from my face, pile my wild curls atop my head, and face myself. I’m bare and vulnerable, looking at myself exactly as I am, not how I hope to be perceived, and asking: *Why me?*

*Redefining Realness* is my attempt to extend that nakedness and vulnerability to you. It is about those parts of ourselves that we silence every day; those parts that we all store away in boxes deep within, where they gather the dust of shame that clouds us. In this book, I aim to open those boxes, display their contents, and be accountable to my truth. This process was gradual and challenging, one in which I had to excavate answers within myself for some tough questions: Who am I, really? How does that answer contribute to the world? How do I tell my story authentically without discounting all the facets and identities that make me? Can I resolve my personal history with sexual abuse, body image, self-love and sex, as well as unpack my relationship with womanhood, beauty, objectification, and “passing”? I hope this book offers clarity and pushes you toward beginnings and conclusions of your own.

My ultimate goal with *Redefining Realness* is to stand firmly in my truth. I believe that telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act. It is an act that can be met with hostility, exclusion, and violence. It can also lead to love, understanding, transcendence, and community. I hope that my being *real* with you will help empower you to step into who you are and encourage you to

share yourself with those around you. It's through my personal decision to be visible that I finally see myself. There's nothing more powerful than truly being *and* loving yourself.