



# Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity

*Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore*

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*Nobody Passes* is a collection of essays that confronts and challenges the very notion of belonging. By examining the perilous intersections of identity, categorization, and community, contributors challenge societal mores and countercultural norms. *Nobody Passes* explores and critiques the various systems of power seen (or not seen) in the act of “passing.” In a pass-fail situation, standards for acceptance may vary, but somebody always gets trampled on. This anthology seeks to eliminate the pressure to pass and thereby unearth the delicious and devastating opportunities for transformation that might create.

Mattilda, aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore, has a history of editing anthologies based on brazen nonconformity and gender defiance. Mattilda sets out to ask the question, “What lies are people forced to tell in order to gain acceptance as ‘real’.” The answers are as varied as the life experiences of the writers who tackle this urgent and essential topic.

## Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity Details

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**Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore**

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# From Reader Review Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity for online ebook

## Calvin says

p 25 "All Mixed Up With No Place To Go: Inhabiting Mixed Consciousness on the Margins" by Nico Dacumos

Dacumos talks about going to Smith College being a brown, low-income... "Looking back, I feel sorry for all of us. All of us, white students and students of color, economically privileged and poor, queer and straight, transgender and nontransgender, found ourselves in an overwhelming situation with no one to help us navigate the difficult negotiations and acts of violence that occur when people from all these different communitites suddenly find themselves in close quarters. U.S. society, after all, continues to be starkly segregated along class and race lines, never allowing people to have the sort of interactions necessary to undo prejudices, stereotypes, and oppressions. However, my empathy only lasts so long--I remember my own experiences and those of other people I know who attended private liberal arts colleges. There is nothing like luring low-income and first-generation-college-attendee students of color to an institution like Smith College and then subjecting them to white, sheltered, economically privileged people to inspire thoughts of suicide and/or homicide. Ultimately, the white and economically privileged students benefit from this experience. They learn how to be good liberals and ocmport themselves in ways that conceal their complicity with white supremacy; they find their lives "enriched by diversity." Meanwhile, students of color and poor students suffer lifelong emotional scars and face the hard truths of why they were recruited so heavily to attend these institutions in the first place. At best, students of color and poor students learn how to pass themselves off in "polite (white) society" so that they can get a job at a large corporation or a nonprofit organization, perhaps learn how to invest money in the capitalist system, and other American Dream-type skills that are meant only to benefit the individual and leave the rich-poor gap, institutionalized racism, and U.S. status quo intact."

Also photocopied Dean Spade's essay... I think it has something to do with the work I want to do?

Terre Thaemlitz:

"Both marriage and visas are systems of economics--not romance. They are neither about the loving romance between individuals nor the patriotic romance between an individual and her nation of choice. They are means of social entry and participation. And, although one might wish to conclude that participating in the matrimonial system somehow standardizes a transgendered person's relationship to dominant culture and economics, the reality is that matrimony and the spousal visa system still bind us to stereotypes of transgendered subsistence and labor revolving around sex work--in this case, the spouse as whore. Unable to buy our way into a country, we find ourselves fucking our way in." p. 185

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## Evelyn Woagh says

As with many anthologies, the essays here can be very good-or-bad, depending on what's being talked about, what the writer's experiences are - and specific to this book: how it relates to the concept of passing. In my reading, I feel there are about 10 good essays out of 27 total. But those ten are mostly really fantastic.

First, let's talk about the bad stuff. The essays I didn't like were typically the ones written by self-entitled

name-reclaimers missing the point. For example, in "Passing Last Summer" written by Dominika Bednarska, the writer, a wheelchair-bound person, says "...now I also say cr\*\*\*le to refer transgressively to other disabled people who are wheelchair users." It is not transgressive to use an ableist slur in this case, and slurs in general, toward people other than oneself. It perpetuates the violence of those words and creates an element of imperialism in which a marginalized person takes on the slur-saying duties that are usually reserved for creeps we need to identify and push out of society like a sliver.

Throughout this book, there are other slurs people seem self-entitled to reclaim for everyone else in that grouping. I often came across the 't' word in reference to transgender people, such as in Rocko Bulldagger's otherwise quite good essay about gq criticism. There also seems to be a perpetuation of binarism, with Carole McDonnell using that ignorant phrase 'his/her,' again in an otherwise educating essay. Dean Spade does some great things for our community, but his essay was among the most intense. For a community struggling with survival, I think it best to be sensitive in our writings and in our recognition of the dangers of being variant.

Finally, there were also numerous environments of hyper-sexuality to the point of implying nonconsent and exploitation by other gender non-conforming people. For example, in Rocko Bulldagger's analysis of problems within the trans community, Rocko seems to not recognize personal analysis and criticism of Rocko's own hypersexualized behaviour toward minors. In the essay "the end of gq", Rocko says that, among other sexually intense behaviours at True Spirit conference, there were people incl. Rocko who were "gleefully exposing the underages to sexually explicit material," and finally described all this as "beautiful and consequently could never last." Rocko also mentions the conference drew homeless queer youth. Did they offer housing for these kids, or just show them pornography? Would we as a community want hyper-sexualised individuals such as Rocko to be housing our youth and potentially exploiting them like the oppressor class does? I'm beginning to consider sexuality as, rather than something liberating and radical like these people seem to think, as instead stifling, distracting, and perpetuating oppression particularly toward youth-without-housing.

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Now, on to the good stuff. My favorite essays, and short reasons for them, are, in no preferential order:

\*Reaching too Far/Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (as focused and confidence-building as usual, but she uses a couple times the r-word in relation to sexual violence)

\*All Mixed Up With No Place to Go/Nico Dacumos (goes deeply into how gender and race defines our experiences, along with internal divisions, but at one point [p.33] makes creepy sexually violent comments toward the reader, among other things)

\*Friction Burn/Stacy May Fowls (an interesting introduction to her experiences trying to pass as the 'good girl' character while balancing her personal life with her public feminism. Discusses her connection with BDSM as a consequence of her survival of domestic violence [talk of nonconsent p.45])

\*Who's That Wavin' That Flag?/Jessica Hoffman (gives some perspective on the immigrant workers' movements, their homogenization of the movement's cultures by the upper-class 'patriots'.)

\*Different Types of Hunger/Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (gives some excellent historical perspective on the long ongoing cycle of oppression by working- and middle-class white folks, particularly those descended of the ulster scot imperialists)

\*What I Learned From Being G-Minus In The World of Homohop Commerce/Ralowe T. Ampu, DDS (really well-written critique of the gay bourgeoisie, which he witnessed personally in san francisco during his musical career there with the D/DC)

\*No Longer Just America/Stephanie Abraham (another really good essay by a mixed-race gender-variant who struggles with personal identity and public reception)

\*The End of Genderqueer/Rocko Bulldagger (obviously offended by several things in this essay, but the analysis of the term gq, what gender and passing mean when one's identity is to break down the concept of passing, etc, these are all great things to read)

\*Melchizedek's Three Rings/Carole McDonnell (some great information about how to simultaneously pass and express oneself effectively in a group of people different from oneself who may be silencing and ignorant of that person's existence)

\*Why Mahmud Can't Be a Pilot/Naeem Mohaiemen (another sad story about cultural loss due to migration and assimilation, but also an encouraging story of this person's striving toward learning more about themselves through their cultures)

So, overall, when moving past the bad stuff, the essays I enjoyed, I really enjoyed. I will continue to evolve because of having read this book, and will seek out many more like it and hopefully even better than it as this is what we as a 'community' of variant people must be striving toward.

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### **Megan says**

This is a book of essays which started out as a work about gender and ended up including race, religion, sexuality, and a few other things. All the works center around the idea of passing: who can and can't, feelings of whether one should or shouldn't, and what do you give up in order to do so. I'm nonbinary and I will never be able to pass as what I am, but instead often unintentionally pass for something else; reading the experiences of others with these lines we blur was an interesting experience for me.

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### **Joshua says**

Incredible,

there may be a few essays in here that are a bit dull and don't go anywhere, but the majority are outstanding. Such a variety of perspectives from different backgrounds and different issues, the only thing I felt was lacking was a bisexual - oriented essay, but this is only a minor, personal complaint. The connection this gives to so many different sexualities, gender expressions, gender identities and races really reinforces the commonality in the issue of passing, and the way in which our attempts cause us pain.

Can't praise this book enough

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### **Karolina says**

A lot of great stories that made me stop and think about how society perceives/treats certain groups of people. However, a lot of these stories came off as people complaining about not being understood? At the end of the day, who cares what others think of you?

Either way, these are all conversations we need to have in order to be better to and more understanding of others.

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## **Jenny says**

Although this book is 10 years old, many of those essays could take place today. Reading, I could see here and there details that have changed over the years (in Canada at least), but we are still far from being able to say most of these people could "pass" without performing an act that is not inherently them.

Once again with books from the early 2000s, the words "they/them" seem to not have existed to qualify a person whose gender is known, even if that gender doesn't fit the society-recognized binary. Makes for a harder read ("s/he" is just awful to see, grammar-wise) and reinforce the impression that people outside the gender binary don't fit in, although they should.

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## **Ambrose Hall says**

Nobody Passes is about gender, but it's also about all the many other ways that people can pass or fail to pass in their lives. It's a collection of essays, stories, conversations and interviews by all sorts of people that Mattilda has brought together, and it covers class, race, religion, sexuality and gender. It's quite specific to US culture, but I found gaining a closer and more personal insight into US identity politics really interesting, especially as we (in the UK) import many of these ideas anyway.

Importantly, Nobody Passes is one of those important books in my life that has given me a bit of extra space to breathe and be. There's such a very great pressure to fit in, in so many ways. That pressure hits everyone, not just trans people. Mainstream gender narratives alone do so much violence, twisting us to be an ideal thing, a symbol of something. To be read in the correct way. This book shows identity as complex and slippery, as something difficult to fit neatly, and most importantly, as something we get to make for ourselves, even though that making might come with a fight.

If I ever read another guide to passing, it will be too soon, but this I will read again. I'm definitely going to look for more of Mattilda's work.

(From my blog: <https://mrvolpone.wordpress.com/> )

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## **Emily says**

This is a dizzying collection of narratives from all across identities.

I loved the variety in narrative style, ranging from coolly academic to deeply and dramatically personal. Mattilda does an excellent job bringing voices from all across the map together to collaborate (or really, collectively deconstruct) identity politics. So many of the essays in this collection express a simultaneous anguish over not passing and a conscious rejection of the boundaries and expectations placed upon us as humans of any identity. It reads at times like a short story and at times like a history textbook, but the diversity of voices brings a constantly refreshing tone to the work and kept me tearing all the way through it.

I think this collection is an excellent jumping off point for any discussion, personal consideration, or

academic inquiry into identity and what it means to "pass".

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### **John Carter McKnight says**

Just what an anthology should be: diverse, utterly readable, thought-provoking, of generally high and uniform quality. Nobody Passes is a can't-put-down tour de force of race, gender and cultural queering, eye-opening, provocative, moving, often hilarious. Really just a wonderful, readable book.

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### **Kim says**

A collection of essays on all sorts of passing and "contradictory" ways of being: the rejection of submissive sexuality by many feminists, passing as white, air travel as trans, being openly radically queer in your racist/sexist/homophobic parents' house, identifying with queer struggle and sexuality when your attractions are "hetero." this book has a very open view of what it means to pass. I haven't read all of the articles but so far what is lacking is an explicit discussion on the politics of passing. Who gets left behind by those of us who pass? What are the consequences for those of us who pass without trying? And what amount of privilege does passing lend and how do the people who have it deal with it while struggling for a more just world? Or how do the rest of us deal with it when people who pass then accept their privilege and use it to the detriment of the rest of us?

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### **Amy says**

I really wanted to like this book. I love the work that Mattilda does to fight assimilation and the erasure of an honest queer culture. I find stories of how people are read by others and how that structures and shapes interactions to be fascinating. I quite purposefully don't pass as much and when I do, I'm always a bit amused at the interaction. I'll be honest - this book was A LOT OF WHINING. And posturing. I don't need to read pages about how you are "really butch" or "really biracial" - just say you are and talk about how it affects your social interactions with various groups. Ugh. It was like almost every story was a preface to something that was about to get interesting but too long a preface. Really, I wish Mattilda just wrote the whole thing because she's far more interesting a writer than anyone here - I commend her to to giving a voice to such a broad spectrum of people in terms of what it means to pass/not pass but, with a couple of exceptions, her generosity led to a really boring book.

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### **Charlie says**

There were a couple essays I had to skip because of triggering content, but overall this is a really good collection, with a lot of sincere and very vulnerable parts. I cried a couple times. It was really interesting seeing all the different ways the authors explored the concept of passing (and not "just" issues related to being trans), as well as how passing has affected the authors' lives and their perceptions of themselves. The essays by people of multiple ethnicities were often the most engaging, especially when those people also identified as trans and/or nonbinary.

There was this part in "F2Mestizo", by Logan Gutierrez-Mock, in which he mentions going to a meeting with the Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center (LYRIC). In one activity, the people who showed up were "separated... into two groups--white folks and folks of color--in order to discuss race. I didn't know what group to join", Logan writes, "so I asked one of the facilitators. She was mixed, and thankfully she suggested that we form our own mixed group--she and I. For the first time ever in my life, I had a discussion about mixed-race identities." That was a part that made me cry... they were happy tears, though, like a lot of the ones I shed while reading this.

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### **Bluestocking06 says**

This book takes everything you think you know about queer theory and feminism and identity politics, connects it all, rearranges it, and spits it all out in a thought provoking never before seen way. No one will hold your hand as you try to understand how being FTM makes someone understand their mixed latina heritage, all you can do is try to keep up and keep your mind open.

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### **Paige says**

(3.5)

A mixed bag of essays, some enlightening and some confusing or a little off the mark. Content warnings for sexual assault, incest, homophobia, transphobia.

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### **Sarah says**

Sometimes, I have trouble reading non-fiction at a decent pace. I'm far more of a fiction reader, and so it is usually very easy for me to take weeks to finish a book like this.

Except I read all of this one in less than three days, because it was that awesome.

Like all collections of this sort, there were some essays that weren't quite as good as the others. In this case, though, there wasn't a single one I thought was bad- just some that were vaguely incoherent in what they were trying to say. But mixed among them were some truly outstanding and moving pieces.

It's a really diverse and interesting collection that deals with passing in all sorts of ways- gender, sexuality, race, religion, and beyond. No matter what your identity, there's almost certainly something here that will speak to you. Some of the essays affected me so powerfully, I felt unable to put the book down even for a second until I was done.

This is a fantastic book, and I highly recommend it.

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