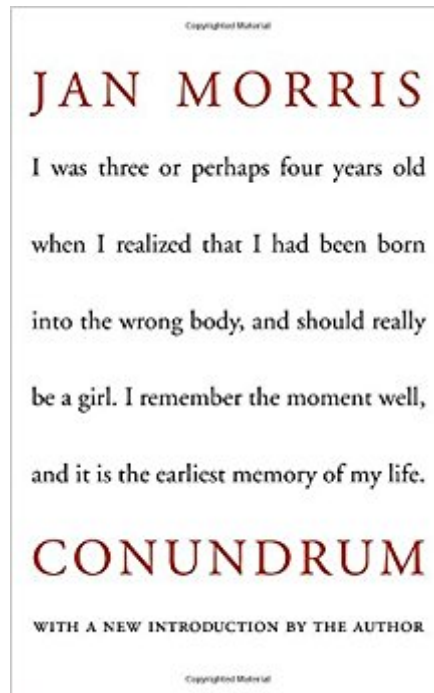


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# Conundrum (New York Review Books Classics)



## Synopsis

The great travel writer Jan Morris was born James Morris. James Morris distinguished himself in the British military, became a successful and physically daring reporter, climbed mountains, crossed deserts, and established a reputation as a historian of the British empire. He was happily married, with several children. To all appearances, he was not only a man, but a man's man. Except that appearances, as James Morris had known from early childhood, can be deeply misleading. James Morris had known all his conscious life that at heart he was a woman. *Conundrum*, one of the earliest books to discuss transsexuality with honesty and without prurience, tells the story of James Morris's hidden life and how he decided to bring it into the open, as he resolved first on a hormone treatment and, second, on risky experimental surgery that would turn him into the woman that he truly was.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Her woman is shockingly conventional, yet to read this great travel writer's account of transition is to understand the word 'journey' truly." —Eileen Myles, *NYT*: The New York Times Style Magazine  
[*Conundrum* is] a brilliant piece of writing "to my mind, it should be part of the established canon of great literature." —Tom Hooper, director of "The Danish Girl," *Vogue*  
A very good writer telling a profoundly poetic story...In fact, it is the author's extreme subjectivity that makes the book as good as it is...After reading this most charming of all Cinderella stories, one feels that sex is just as much a conundrum as ever, which is to say, according to the American Heritage

Dictionary, 'a riddle in which a fanciful question is answered by a pun,' or 'a problem admitting of no satisfactory solution.'

• "The New York Times "Conundrum remains an exquisite read" a rare gift of empathic insight into an experience which most of us will never have but which is strewn with elements of the struggle for belonging, acceptance, and authenticity that most of us face daily in one form or another.

• "Maria Popova, Brain Pickings "Certainly the best first-hand account ever written by a traveler across the boundaries of sex. That journey is perhaps the ultimate adventure for a human being, but although it has been the subject of myth and speculation since ancient times, it is an authentically modern experience...What Jan Morris does offer, through her life and her work, is a window on the wondrous possibilities of humankind.

• "Newsweek "This book is a very well-written account of some of the emotional factors which eventually led the author, by then in his forties, to submit to expensive surgery in Casablanca.

• "The Washington Post Book World "This is a beautiful book. I found it to be melancholic, courageous, and wise. That it's subject matter is Jan Morris's transsexual journey almost seems secondary to her incredible prose and the clarity of her honesty and introspection. Beyond the issue of gender, she searches for an answer to that most elusive of questions: who am I?"

• "Jonathan Ames "The finest descriptive writer in our time, of the watercolor kind.

• "Rebecca West "If there is anything typical about Miss Morris's experience, however, she has successfully disguised it.

• "The Times Literary Supplement

"This is a beautiful book. I found it to be melancholic, courageous, and wise. That it's subject matter is Jan Morris's transsexual journey almost seems secondary to her incredible prose and the clarity of her honesty and introspection. Beyond the issue of gender, she searches for an answer to that most elusive of questions: who am I?" -- Jonathan Ames

in the human condition. I remember when this book was first published in the 1970s, having read a review in the "New York Review of Books" on it. At the time I considered the condition too much of an anomaly to read about. There were so many larger groups fighting for their rights and change in status in society: women, blacks, homosexuals, Hispanic farm workers even veterans of the latest war. Transgender issues certainly are more prevalent in the news today, with numerous arguments about bathrooms. One push to read it came from Elizabeth Pisani's "The Wisdom of Whores: Bureaucrats, Brothels and the Business of AIDS. Much of her book is set in Indonesia, in the marginalized underworld of prostitution and drugs. In order to learn more about the methods of HIV transmission, Pisani had to learn how this

subculture actually worked. And it is complex, and even confusing, with many a subcategory, and a reticence of outsiders to ask what really goes on. As a fellow reviewer quipped: even they are confused about their condition and role (which is something Jan Morris confirmed in this work.) The other push came from my reading of my first work written about Morris's Trieste And The Meaning Of Nowhere. I found that work rewarding. She has something useful to say. Perhaps she could shed some light on this "confusing" issue. James Morris grew up in Wales "a country she is still fond of. At the age of four, listening to his mother play Sibelius on the piano, he realized that he was actually of the female gender. But what that actually means, I felt she failed to illuminate. She distinguishes her "transgender" status from sexual longings for the same sex as well as transvestitism. She just felt she was a woman, yet does not distinguish what that means from being a man. It is an increasingly slippery slope, if sex is set aside, to define how women really are different from men, other than their physical characteristics. Negative stereotyping could abound. She doesn't go there; it is as though the reader should understand, and at least this one does not. James Morris managed to play the male role into middle age. He went to Oxford, and at the end of the Second World War joined the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers, and entered the aforementioned Trieste with the regiment at the war's end. He would go on to Cairo and the British mandate of Palestine in the immediately aftermath of the war. He seemed to love the Army. He was an intelligence officer, and it seemed to be a very pleasant "club." Given my own perspective, I found the following difficult to digest: "the English class system to have been one of the secrets of such a regiment's long success" it meant there was no envy, you see, it was all in the nature of things. After the military, he had a respectable career as a foreign correspondent for "The Guardian," "The Times" (of London), and worked in the Arab News Bureau in Cairo. From there, in 1953, he climbed to at least 19,000 ft. on Mt. Everest, and his lean 26 year old body raced down off of Everest, providing "the scoop" to the world that Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first to successfully reach the summit and return (but he never mentions their names in this account!) More astonishingly, Morris would marry, and father five children. However, in a chapter entitled "Zero," he says that many a male reader would want to know about his sex life, and it is summarized by the chapter's title. Hum. As I said previously, it is confusing or better yet, a "conundrum," since there are those five kids | Another five immaculate conceptions? Throughout all of this, he continued to wrestle with the fact that he was not in the right body. One doctor in NYC seems to have been particularly understanding and helpful. He starts on hormone therapy. A massive amount of female

hormones (estrogen?... he does not specifically say). His body definitely softens, and he enters into an androgynous state, where strangers are not too sure. Finally, he decides to have the male equipment removed, and due primarily to legal reasons, travels to a well-known physician in Morocco. This is where many a male might cross his legs (and not coquettishly!) And after reading Morris's description of the staff, the furnishings, and the sanitation, doubly so. Afterwards, he describes the various other patients who had been tormented so long about their condition, and the relief they have finally achieved. Jan Morris writes well and incisively on many issues. I just purchased her book *Sultan in Oman*. Regrets about her transformation? None. S/he has lead a fascinating life, and has been brave enough to share it with the world. Much of that rates 5-stars. But I felt that there were omissions, and unreconciled inconsistencies in the account, and, of course there is that devotion to the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers, all of which merit no more than 3-stars, and thus I've averaged to: 4-stars.

A soldier and correspondent, who once climbed Mount Everest with Mallory in 1953, changes his sex twenty years later and explains transsexualism in a flight of fanciful prose fit for an Oxford graduate. Jan Morris resigns from a successful male life to live out her days as a writer of books and traveler of the world. In this memoir, so unlike the transsexual transition stories in the media today, Morris describes the plight of a true transsexual hiding in a male body until a time comes when he can no longer deal with the conundrum swirling around inside of him. The read can be difficult for all but the educated reader who is well versed in historical events of the time and the affluent language of the sophisticated graduate. Morris tries to dispel myths and reveal the inner workings of the mind of a true transsexual as she explains her view of the more significant events of her life. The language is poetic and very descriptive in a modernist writing style, full of internal dialog and descriptions as only an experienced correspondent and travel writer could present. If one is able to pierce the intellectual diatribe Morris uses to convey her story, they will enjoy some clever anecdotes and remarkable historical events. Unfortunately, she delves into some of the more interesting moments using conclusory statements about her inner struggle to survive nearly forty years as a male. Here, she leaves the reader wanting more but with an appreciation of what it is like to possess male body as a woman and live a rich and multifaceted life among both genders. Morris was obviously still in the throes of the excitement of realizing a life long obsession to change sex and feel normal in her own body when she wrote this story and thus concentrated almost exclusively on the positive more auspicious aspects of his conundrum. Unfortunately, she failed to target a specific audience and kept the prose vague and ethereal. It is difficult to determine whether

she was avoiding much of the anguish in her early life that for the sake of her former spouse, 5 children, close friends, all who undoubtedly would be left with the aftermath of any exposé. It is no less a very well written account of her feelings while in a male body, albeit mostly the joys and absent the chaos associated with the gender dysfunction and lacked honest discussion of the internal conflict endured to achieve her dream. Unlike Lily Elbe's story twenty years earlier, Morris keeps thoughts more controlled. She establishes a brief history of the transsexual experience to date, mentioning Elbe's story, ties to the American transsexual scene of the sixties, Christine Jorgensen, and her meeting with the most influential doctor in modern history, Harry S. Benjamin, whose pioneer research set the standards and course of conduct by the medical community that extends into today. I highly recommend the book to scholars and educated persons able to negotiate the sophisticated verse and intellectual style of writing of a brilliant and well accomplished person and writer. If possible to give 4 and 1/2 stars I would. I only hold back because I felt in trying to shield friends and family some embarrassment and pain, her writing felt circular, convoluted and restrained and it lacked the verve she has shown to possess as an experienced war correspondent as demonstrated in much of her other writing.

Celebrated travel writer Jan Morris was born James Morris and spent years with the British military service and later worked as a foreign correspondent in the Middle East. But Morris always felt something was wrong, and with the support of his then-wife (they later divorced and ultimately re-married) went through what was decades ago the complicated (and rather expensive) process of transitioning from a man to a woman. Morris' details are fascinating, especially during the period when she would appear in some gatherings as James and as others as Jan. Considering all of the hoopla these days with transgender issues, it's refreshing to read of someone who successfully and happily made the transition as a pioneer.

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