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Audience crams to see transgendered author

Boylan uses humor, book to talk to crowd

By Diana McElwain
Assistant News Editor

It was standing room only at Memorial Union's Bangor Room when transgendered author Jennifer Finney Boylan came to speak about her experiences and to read from her book: "She's Not There." Boylan is no stranger to the University of Maine. She spoke in the same room last year, and has visited Human Sexuality classes.

"I guess it's my annual invasion of this wonderful campus," she said.

Boylan opened her reading with humor, telling the story of how a past reading of hers was at the same time as Hillary Clinton's.

"The only people who would come to my reading were transsexuals and Republicans," she said. "Which leads to the question, what is a transsexual Republican?"

She tried to help the audience have a better understanding of

what it means to be transgendered. "Transgendered is an umbrella term. It's a whole group of people who are gender variant," she said. "Some think it is a hobby that got out of control. That's not the case ... it could happen to anyone. It could happen to you."

She also cleared up the difference between being transgendered and cross dressing.

"[Cross dressers are] straight men who really like to dress up, God bless them," she said.

Boylan said that it was easy to misunderstand the many terms, but she hoped that someday they will all seem familiar.

"They deserve to be spoken of without shame," she said.

Boylan read from her book, describing with humor and emotion a person in her support group who eventually took her own life. She said that it was the first time she read the passage to an audience.

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READ ON —

Author Jennifer Boylan reads an excerpt from her book "She's not there" to a packed, standing-room only audience in the Bangor Room on Tuesday. Boylan talked about the experience of undergoing a sex-change operation, and becoming a female after growing up a male.

CAMPUS PHOTO BY STEVEN KNAPP



BOYLAN

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"I never read that chapter. It takes me to a very vulnerable place. It focuses in on the tremendous pain and suffering that transsexual people go through," she said.

Boylan said that she did not want anyone to think that all stories about transsexuals ended so tragically.

"It's possible to survive this condition ... most of us go on to live lives that are full and joyful," she said.

She said that not only did she survive her experience, she was grateful for having it.

"I feel lucky to be born transsexual. It sounds nutty, but I've been able to view the worlds of men and women up close," she said.

Boylan said that the support that she has received has made the

experience that much better.

"More often than not, I've been overwhelmed by support. Not just by liberal professors, but by normal people from your Maine home town," she said.

The talk closed with questions from the audience, which Boylan said she was happy to answer.

"I always like the question and answer part better ... you can ask me anything, don't be embarrassed," she said.

She then ran back and forth to meet her questioners, describing experiences such as the process she underwent before having a sex-change operation. Boylan said she first went through therapy, then began taking hormones. She cautioned the audience about their danger, and their efficiency. "Estrogen can be very dangerous," she said. "The hormones did what you see here."

Boylan said the next step was a "real life test," where a person had to live as the new gender for one year with no exceptions.

"You can't go back to being a guy to fix your car or something," she said.

At the end of this process, Boylan underwent a sex change operation. However, she said that she remained basically the same person inside.

"There's some things I'm never going to learn how to do," she said. "Like a French braid."

She said that the process was a slow one, and she had to deal with many details such as a name change.

It's difficult to change your name halfway through life. I'd sit there with one of those name your baby books," she said. "I kept going back to Jenny."

Boylan said that while they may seem unusual, her obstacles were similar to the problems that all people must deal with.

"You will have a moment that you will have to make a decision that is difficult," she said. "I found that with the gift of family, friends and love I could do it."



CAMPUS PHOTO BY STEVEN KNAPP

SIGN PLEASE — Author Jennifer Boylan signs her book "She's not there" for UMaine student Jennifer Bodwell after the humor-filled speech she delivered Tuesday afternoon in the Bangor Room.