

Lucy Sante is the same writer she has always been, ARTDAILY, February 16, 2024



Lucy Sante in the basement office of her home in Kingston, N.Y. on Jan. 9, 2024.

In her memoir “I Heard Her Call My Name,” the author reflects on her life and embarking on a gender transition in her late 60s. (Erik Tanner/The New York Times)

by María Sánchez Díez

NEW YORK, NY.- It took a lifetime.

After carrying a secret “the size of a house” for decades, Lucy Sante, a writer and the author of, among others, “Low Life,” a cult book about the grittier side of New York City, began transitioning in 2021, at the age of 66.

All the subterfuges she had built to conceal her identity finally crumbled, thanks to a small experiment during the pandemic. She downloaded FaceApp, which allows users to see how they would look if they swapped genders. She uploaded one photo and then another until an alternative timeline of her life as a woman emerged. She was irreversibly gripped by what she saw: the person that she had most avoided and yearned for all her life.

This epiphany starts Sante’s new book, “I Heard Her Call My Name: A Memoir of Transition,” in which she jumps between past and present, narrating her transition process while revisiting her life from a new vantage point.

The book intertwines these two timelines — “a cheap technique from suspense novels,” as Sante puts it.

The past is the official tale: Her working-class family’s migration from Belgium to the New Jersey suburbs in the ’60s. Her beginnings as a writer working for Barbara Epstein at The New York Review of Books. Her adventures working at the Strand bookstore and wandering around New York City’s counterculture scene in the ’70s alongside figures like Elizabeth Hardwick, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Nan Goldin, whose company Sante at one point avoided, afraid of Goldin’s proximity to trans people.

Then there is the transition, with its ambivalence and complexity, the irrevocability and exhilaration of it; “All I could do was emote,” Sante said of that time. The construction of a new person. The starts and stops. The quest for a version of femininity that would suit her. The breakup with her longtime partner. The fear of being romantically shunned by women.

Sante, who will turn 70 this year, said she is finally living as her true self, and she does not care if this sounds like a cliché. From her house in Kingston, New York, she talked about what it means to transition later in life, about trans rights in the United States and about the changes she has been through. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What connections do you see between your gender transition and any changes in your voice as a writer?

A: I’ve wondered about that a lot, and I don’t think there’s that much difference. One of the under-arguments of the book is that I was never really a man at all. I’m still the same person. I’m just outwardly manifesting what was inwardly there. But there is one major difference, which is that I was carrying around the secret for 60 years. And now, having gotten rid of that secret, I have nothing left to hide.

Q: You have mentioned that your ambition as a writer was one thing that kept you from transitioning earlier. You were scared of becoming “the trans writer.”

A: I never want to have one subject, ever. After I wrote “Low Life,” there was a pressure on me to write more New York books, and I just didn’t want to do that. When I’m doing my work, the subject matter is of central importance, but it’s not as important for me as the writing. It’s like I’m a painter. I can paint the ballet, I can paint a war scene, and I can paint the flowers in my backyard. It’s really all about the brushstrokes. That’s the way I am about my writing.

Q: As an author, you are borderline obsessed with photography — how we portray ourselves, how we portray others. It seems fitting that the thing that finally pushed you through was photography.

A: It was visual evidence. Once I put through a recent photograph through FaceApp, I was amazed by the results. My first impulse was to see what I would have looked like 50 years ago. I started rounding up all the photographs that I have of me. There aren't that many, but they're scattered all over the house, from the basement to the attic. It became a project. It took at least four or five days for me to dig up all these photographs.

I had known all my life. That's why I didn't cross-dress or anything; I knew if I did that there was no turning back. I finally got to that point after all those years.

Q: What do you think about the copies of your books that sit in shelves or in bookstores and that have your deadname on them?

A: I made my peace with that very early. I hope that my deadname never dies, because we have to get rid of the back inventory (laughs).

Q: You point to the growing tolerance in society toward trans people as one factor that allowed you to come out, but the political climate has changed a lot in the last couple of years, with a flurry of bills seeking to restrict transgender rights introduced in at least 25 states. How have you experienced this wave?

A: It makes me very sad. I don't feel in danger because I'm too old. Nobody cares about me as a sex object. There's been violence against trans women, especially trans women who have to do sex work, and guys whose sense of shame is expressed by violence toward their partner. Now it's joined by these people who are terrified their children are going to be trans. They want to control how their children think. It's a convenient cultural scapegoat.

Q: Why? Do you think the challenge to the binary scares people?

A: People are afraid of instability. They're afraid of ambiguity. They're afraid of anything that's not clearly designated, black and white. Because we are relatively few — probably many more than anybody suspects when you come down to the closeted cases — many people, especially out in the middle of the country, have never met a trans person. They don't know what they're like, so they can just rely on some cartoon version in their head.

Movies have been very bad. Trans people have been used as comic figures or creepy villains — that awful Brian De Palma movie called “Dressed to Kill” or “The Silence of the Lambs,” movies where the murderer is a trans person and they’re murdering because they’re weird and trans.

Q: Your book is not political, but it exists in the particular context we are discussing. How do you think it will fit in the conversation about trans people in the United States?

A: I hope that it will humanize. This is not the first trans memoir that’s been written. There are dozens, but because I’m a writer known for a number of other books, this might attract a readership that would not ordinarily be reading a trans memoir, and it will help to explain how it works, how it’s serious, how it’ll last a lifetime.

I didn’t want to make it a polemic; I wanted it to be a personal story. I think that’s more powerful than being a polemic, because polemic results in dead prose. It’s just rhetoric. It passes through you like air. I wanted something that would stick in the mind.

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