

a e BOOKS

Spy "Man"

BY E. LYNN LEMONT

Norah Vincent changed her clothes, added facial hair, walked a different walk and talked a different talk to investigate what men were "really" like when they thought themselves alone among their xy peers.

By her own account, she did a credible job of passing as a man, since she was not detected, although some people thought her male alter ego ("Ned") was gay. In somewhat pretentiously titled chapters Vincent tells how Ned joined a men's bowling league ("Friendship"); trolled strip bars

is still a war between the sexes, Norah Vincent could be seen as going undercover as a spy with a conscience, although it could be debated whether true conscience might have left the deceived with their illusions rather than letting them know, to their humiliation, just how thoroughly they had been duped.

And "duped" is the right word here. Vincent set out to see whether she could pass by lying and visual deception, a different matter than when a transman is working on getting his outer reality to conform to his inner one. There may be some correspon-

dent, either that or a homosexual encounter."), but fight or fuck is what it comes down to.

Which is part of the annoyance provoked by Ned/Norah's narrative. Vincent is very clear that her experience is not about being either a transvestite or a closet transsexual. She never did "T" (testosterone), so there was no hormonal drive to deal with. She issues another disclaimer in her introductory chapter: "Nothing I say here will have any value except as one person's observations about her own experience. What follows is just my view of things, myopic and certainly inapplicable

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with another man and on his own ("Sex"); tried picking up women in a straight bar and at a local icecream parlor, and dated women contacted via a personals website ("Love"); spent time in a Catholic monastery ("Life"); joined the macho-cult ranks of door-to-door salesmen ("Work"); and participated in a Robert Bly-based men's group, including a woodsy-lodge retreat with its members ("Self").

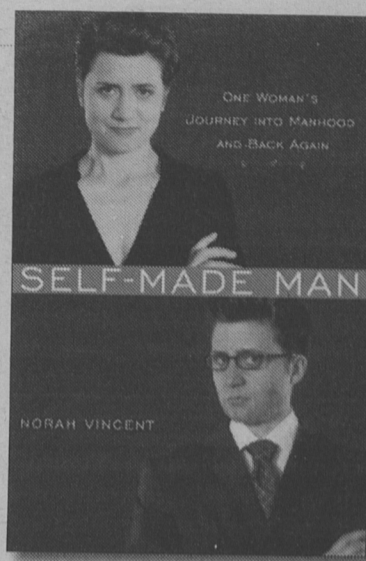
In nearly every venue, Ned "came out" as a woman by the end, in large part to assuage her own guilt at lying to these well-meaning and mostly accepting folks, but also to gauge their reactions to the masquerade. If there

dences of experience, but the intention - of a transman to become himself, and of Vincent to play a role in furtherance of a book - is totally different.

No question, *Self-Made Man* is a provocative book. Parts of it are absorbing, lyrical, and acutely and concisely observed in discussing what being part of a male social reality felt like to a woman passing as a man. One of Norah's early observations, during a one-night stand in male drag on a dare by a drag king friend, is that men look each other in the eye only when they plan to either fuck or fight. She expresses it more delicately ("To look another male in the eye and hold his gaze is to invite con-

to anything so grand as a pronouncement on gender in American society." But she can't, apparently, help herself when it comes to making pronouncements.

A simple handshake with a man is "bonding" rather than competitive, while women's handshakes are "fake and cold, full of limp gentility." Sex solidarity "is something feminism tried to teach us," but "bra-burning hadn't changed all that much," while men "just seemed to know" that "brotherhood was powerful." In the bowling league, Ned's teammates wanted to "fix [his] ineptitude," unlike female athletes, who would "be secretly happy about it and try to abet it under the table."



Self-Made Man

By Norah Vincent Downing
 Viking (Penguin Group)
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 January 2006

power, not only to arouse, but to give worth, self-worth, meaning, initiation, sustenance, everything. ... I began to wonder whether the most extreme men resort to violence with women because they think that's all they have, their one pathetic advantage ..."

As a lesbian, Vincent ends up generalizing about two more-or-less alien cultures: straight women and straight men.

Most fascinating to me was Ned's sojourn in a monastery. The social dynamics among the brothers were keenly observed and similar to those of other groups I'm familiar with. The same holds true, for the most part, for Ned's participation in and observation of the men's group.

Perhaps most telling, Norah Vincent had a mental breakdown after sustaining her male identity "on and off" for 18 months. Her inclusion of that fact in her story evokes respect.

Despite my objections, I've recommended *Self-Made Man* to friends. The journey is worth the time it takes to read. At her best, Vincent challenges assumptions about gender in ways that get under your skin. ▼

To be fair, those pronouncements come early in the book, and as the narrative goes on Vincent makes fewer of them.

But other parts of the book are troubling, too. In a strip club, there's little sympathy for the "mercenary" women who make their money in five-minute lap dances, and much more for the poor victimized men who must buy such ersatz sex or go the five-fingered route in the bathroom. The upshot, Vincent says, is that "nobody was more or less victimized than anyone else. The girls got money. The men got an approximation of sex and flirtation. ... everyone was equally debased by the experience." But I note that suddenly the women are "girls" and the guys are always "men."

Likewise in dating scenarios, Vincent examines in detail and with great sympathy the rejection men feel every time a woman refuses a man's pick-up line, while barely acknowledging women's realities of rape and violence from male dates.

According to Vincent, "to men, in the mind, women have a lot of

➔ E. Lynn Lemont reads and writes in Franklin County.



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