

*Material Girls* by Kathleen Stock is not a novel. Stock is a professor of Philosophy, and the book is written using philosophical arguments. The subject is sex – not the act but the definition of sex as a term for gender. The book has also plunged head-first into a particularly vitriolic debate, which at its heart, is the question of whether a person can decide their gender on the basis of feelings and emotions rather than their biology. Some people feel that they were born into the ‘wrong’ gender and wish to transition to the opposite of their biological sex. This is different from being homosexual but can still attract social antipathy. In the past, such people were living a lie and tended to suffer from the psychological problems associated with that. Some would restrict their behaviour to cross-dressing, but for others, their feelings would be strong enough for them to undergo gender re-assignment surgery. Both groups of people were called trans, though those who had succeeded in being convincingly of the opposite sex would be defined as having ‘passed’. However, in recent years, only a declaration of being of the opposite gender is required for someone to be recognised as of that gender, which is called adopting a gender identity.

*Material Girls* starts with a brief history of how the issue around trans politics grew, then develops the assertion that a trans person is not of the sex to which they aspire; in other words, a man transitioning as a woman is still not a woman – and vice versa. Stock concentrates on male to female transitioning, since that raises a number of questions for women, not least of which is their personal safety. She brings to bear various arguments, with one of the most persuasive being that a trans man can have none of the experience of being a woman, such as periods, sexual discrimination and having to be much more wary about personal safety. She has no argument with the trans community itself, but regards the fact that a man can use female facilities and take part in sport as a woman simply by declaring himself as such, is not just wrong but can be dangerous, and leads to increasing concerns for women. She is particularly scathing about Stonewall, which originally campaigned on behalf of the homosexual community, but is now behind much of trans activism. Many activists use aggressive tactics to force their point of view, which they regard is beyond argument. Stock seems to feel that trans activists do not necessarily represent the trans community.

There was quite lively discussion in the group, who generally agreed with Stock’s viewpoint. They were rather surprised that much of the viewpoints around gender identity originated in the academic sphere and were disappointed at the response of some universities to trans activist pressure. They were particularly concerned about the attitude of some parents to their children and the prescription of ‘puberty blockers’ to adolescents. Most of the group are women and could associate with Stock’s personal experiences and tended to agree with her view that this was not going to help the position of women in society. There was also the feeling that concentrating on trans politics is diverting attention away from more significant issues, such as the climate emergency, the cost-of-living crisis and growing political instability. At the end of the day, the answer is that everyone, whether cis (male or female), trans, gay, of whatever race, should be treated with respect, whatever their views.