

# 'THE DANISH GIRL' AUTHOR VISITS CAMPUS

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As the audience mingles around the room looking for empty seats, a woman watches over them. She sits in a red dress with a cigarette hanging out of her mouth and a playing card in her right hand.

The woman's name is Lili Elbe, the star of tonight's talk. The painting of her displayed on a screen was done by her wife, Gerda Wegener, in 1928.

David Ebershoff, author of *The Danish Girl*, tells their story. The novel, released in 2000, tells the fictionalized story of Elbe and her journey to be the first person to undergo sex reassignment surgery.

"When Lili Elbe, who inspired my first book *The Danish Girl* and the film, sat for this painting, she was at a crossroads," Ebershoff said. "After years of internal struggle, she had finally come to understand who she really was. Assigned male at birth and given the name Einar Wegener, Lili can finally see her true self in the mirror and in portraits like Queen of Hearts, but she was a transgender woman decades before the word 'transgender' existed."

Ebershoff came to UNC Asheville as part of the English department's visiting writers series. As the Goodman Endowed Visiting Writer for the spring semester, Ebershoff was extended the invitation by Lori Horvitz, English professor and director of the women, gender and sexuality studies program.

"Last year at the San Miguel's Writers Conference in Mexico I attended David Ebershoff's keynote talk," Horvitz said. "His presentation about the writing of *The Danish Girl* was captivating, inspiring and stayed with me. When I returned to Asheville I emailed him and asked if he'd be open to coming to UNCA giving a similar presentation and within the hour, he said he would

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— David Ebershoff

love to come and that was just really generous and kind.”

Ebershoff's talk at UNCA focused mostly on the writing of *The Danish Girl*, his first novel. Throughout the event he details his first interaction with Elbe's story, which he found as a near-parenthetical in a book about gender theory.

The writer said he was struck by her story not only because it showed her profound bravery, but because Ebershoff himself had always assumed Christine Jorgensen, an American, was the first person to have gender reassignment surgery. However, if the book Ebershoff read was correct, Elbe's story took place nearly two decades before Jorgensen, yet there was little information about her.

Ebershoff said his initial thought was that Elbe's life would make a great story.

"I was in my mid-20s and I always wanted to be a writer," Ebershoff said. "At the time — and in some ways still today — I was incredibly shy and self-conscious about my writing. I had no faith in my ability to tell stories or to write well or to write good sentences."

Ebershoff struggled for months, holding onto Elbe's story and not

knowing what to do with it.

"The mind can tell you a thousand reasons why not to do something, especially maybe the most important things in life. I allowed my mind to speak that way to myself," Ebershoff said. "I didn't do anything even though I had done that initial research about her life. I didn't do anything else, yet kept thinking about her. I kept wondering what kind of person would be so brave to take these steps when she had no role models. She had nobody to look to. She had a surgeon who had never done this before. What kind of courage does that require?"

After nearly six months of stewing in the information, Ebershoff said he had a vision in which he saw himself picking up a copy of the *New York Times* and opening it to see a book review about a novel written about Elbe. He said his fear was not that someone else would write the story, but instead that he was not even going to try.

He saved up money and his vacation time at Random House to take two weeks off to visit Denmark and find Elbe's story.

When describing what about Elbe's story resonated so deeply with him, Ebershoff points to his work as an editor. He said, as an editor, he was always looking for stories that had what he called the "uns" — the underrepresented, the untold, the unlikely, the unprecedented, the unusual.

"It goes back to the idea of writing the book I'd want to read. I like to read books where the stakes are high even if those high stakes are very internal to a character who may not seem from the outside a significant figure, but that character's life is huge to that character. I want to read the high stakes about characters I am curious about and whose stories I believe in and whose stories I haven't quite read before," Ebershoff said. "My eyes cast not at the obvious winner, but the people

at the side. That's kind of where my heart goes."

This searching out of untold stories is something Ebershoff hopes to pass onto other writers. As a professor in the MFA program at Columbia University, Ebershoff said he urges his students to write the story they want to read but cannot find.

For Ebershoff, this story was Elbe's. Though he admits people are different, they still have enough similarities for the writer to empathize with someone who died decades before they were born.

"There will be biological details that are quite different from your own, but the characters that you're drawn to are going to share some important qualities of yourself," Ebershoff said. "You'll find yourself in these characters and then you'll find some characters that you also want to write about who are fundamentally different."

The biggest difference between Ebershoff and Elbe is one that has been pointed out several times to him and was brought up by an audience member during his time at UNCA.

"There's a lot of talk about cultural appropriation these days," the gentleman said. "I'm curious — given that you're not transgender how did you navigate that?"

Ebershoff said this was an important question to him and one he did not take lightly, even when beginning his book.

"I understand and totally respect why people raise these questions and I listen to them and I don't dismiss them," Ebershoff said. "Some of these questions I asked myself at the outset and some of them — it was 20 years ago. I didn't quite have the lexicon to think about these questions of appropriation the way we do today. In a basic philosophical sense, I did ask those questions and so I take them seriously and I

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