Elizabeth Reis has written a detailed, scholarly, accessible short book about the different ways that intersex bodies and lives have been problematized in American history. Students will enjoy engaging with this book in classes on the history of science, gender studies, American culture, and sexuality studies. Scholars in these fields will enjoy a very detailed account of how so many strands of American culture meet in the legal, newspaper, medical, and autobiographical accounts of intersex lives and bodies. Reis work is both an update and a compliment to Alice Dreger’s (2000) *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*. Her champions are also the group of activists and scholars clustered around the Intersex Society of North America, including Dreger. These activists and scholars issued new challenges to harmful medical mistreatments of intersex people which had been orthodox since the 1950s due to the peculiarly hegemonic theories of the psychologist John Money. Reis’ history ends with a discussion of 21st century consensus on intersex care, which acknowledges the validity of many of the charges of harm brought by ISNA and other activists in the 1990s, and adopts a historically different position from the Money protocols on matters such as early surgical intervention, patient deception, and nomenclature. However, in spite of the high ethical and political stakes in this domain, the strength of this book is that it clearly shows that we continue to live in history and that we should expect no small measure of uncertainty apropos of intersex bodies and lives in the decades ahead.

The five substantive chapters establish Reis’ periodization. The first provides detailed readings of the medical, legal and newspaper accounts from the colonial period in which intersex babies are understood often as monsters who signify a mother’s sexual behaviour and imagination, and intersex adults are positioned as unruly subjects to be known by physical examination and regulated by codes of conduct. By careful attention to primary sources of different sorts, Reis convinced me of her thesis that “In the colonial period, conventional masculinity and femininity were rigidly defined yet nonetheless transgressed” (pp. 14). Chapter 2 covers the antebellum period in which doctors gain increasing power to determine the ‘truth’ of bodies against such others as falsehood, mistake, and deception. Ironically, while intersex bodies were more visible to doctors than ever, the possibility of concluding that dichotomous “sex” was a problematic or uncertain category was very rarely an available conclusion. Doctors often worried about the future engagement of intersex people in the public institution of marriage during this period. However, as Reis narrates in Chapter 3, doctors’ concerns became more fixated on the possibility of homosexual desire and the sexual transmission of disease later in the 19th century. Chapter 4 considers the early 20th century when the ability to test gonadal tissue lead the truth of “sex” to migrate inward from external genitalia to gonads. However, gonads don’t provide easy trust either and Reis provides a detailed pre-history in this chapter and the next of the eventual shift towards the psychological definition of the truth of sex as “gender” in the work of John Money and his colleagues. Historians of American psychology will be interested in her reading of a little-known and little-discussed case history of an intersex adult by psychologist Catharine Cox Miles.

One of the values of Reis’ book is that it convincingly shows that surgical interventions on intersex bodies – which were an unchallenged orthodoxy from the 1950s to the 1990s – were criticized from within medicine, as early as the 19th century, on grounds that many scholars and activists who are concerned with the well-being of intersex people will find surprisingly resonant. Medical interventions have always been about the performance of gender, although the genders that need to be performed for intersex bodies and lives to
become untroubling have varied enormously. This book also tells a story of the repeated ways that human bodies don’t conform to rigid categories of the political imagination (like “sex,” for example). It’s a story of the actions that are taken on, and about, people to “purify” those categories (Douglas, 1966), and the ways that lives are rendered unliveable in the process. Because she doesn’t offer us the comfort of a narrative of progress, Reis’ book is likely to unsettle many people who are unaware of the recent history of the treatment of intersex children and adults. Teaching this book may require some students to challenge preconceived notions about the relationship between bodies and subjecthood, and may trouble others who have personal experience with intersex conditions and who find classroom discussions more explicit that most other public discussions of these conditions or the history of their treatment. In this regard, the explicitness of Reis’ consideration of the ethics of reproducing photographs of intersex bodies will be a very useful pedagogical point.

The real strength of this book is Reis’ persistent close attention to her primary sources and her ability to connect their seemingly local concerns with broad themes in American culture. Her reading of the medical records is engaging and convincing, not least because she is attending both to the lives being medicalized, and to the ways that the reports distort the lives. On occasion Reis offers a reading of past case history through more recent diagnostic categories. However, she does so to clarify the case histories for readers with medical knowledge, and does not elevate contemporary categories to a status that ever makes present understandings appear like anything “truth” that is contrasted against the errors of the past. Rather the present really emerges as something that is very contingent and could easily have looked very different.

Reis accomplishes some thought-provoking intersectional work in the first two chapters around “race” that ties the history of intersex to the ways that the fiction of distinct “races” could be known by the shape of their genitals. If I have a criticism of this book, it is only that Reis might have gone further in this direction in later chapters. I would have liked her to have connected the history of surgery with other distinctly American surgical practices, such as eugenic sterilization (Stern, 2005) and the particularly widespread practice of male circumcision in the 20th century United States (Glick, 2005). The emphasis on “race” was not so evident in later chapters, and I wondered how the history of American ideas about “race” and intersex continued to intersex in the case histories in the period after the Civil War or the civil rights era. Similarly, Terry’s (1999) work on the relationship between sciences of homosexuality and fluid models of “sex” in the 1930s might have been engaged more substantially. However, these are minor criticisms that might be jumping off points for classroom discussion of a book that is likely to engage and inform students across a very wide-range of disciplines indeed.

References
Concensus statement