David Ebershoff’s novel The Danish Girl, has been republished in Australia, and principal photography on the feature film of the same name commences in early 2010. The Danish Girl was first released to considerable acclaim in 2001. After being off the shelves for some years here, Allen & Unwin re-released it in May.

Timely indeed. Nicole Kidman’s production company, Blossom Films, announced that it was co-producing the film of the book with Kidman herself signed up to play the lead role, Lili Elbe née Einar Wegener. Charlize Theron has taken the role of Einar’s wife Gerda, known as Greta in the novel.

The Danish Girl is based on a true story and the protagonist’s memoirs. Lili Elbe wrote Man into Woman in 1931, published under the byline of her friend and editor, Niels Hoyer. An English translation followed in 1933.

The news that someone apparently born a man had been surgically and hormonally transformed into a woman was a worldwide front page sensation back then. Just as quickly though, Lili’s story was overtaken by other events during the Depression and the lead up to World War II. Lili’s story was lost for decades, until Ebershoff read a brief paragraph about a Danish painter named Einar Wegener in a book about gender theory that was sent to him by a friend. He was hooked.

As he learned more about Einar and Lili, Ebershoff kept asking himself, how could this person be missing from history? He had been under the impression that Christine Jorgensen was the first person to undergo ‘sex change’ surgery in 1952. Ebershoff’s curiosity took him to Europe, to Copenhagen where he discovered newspaper articles that Lili herself had written under a pseudonym after she was ousted in the Danish press, and Dresden, where her urogenital correction surgery was performed and where he read about her at the Dresden Hygiene Museum.

Although Nicole Kidman’s news about The Danish Girl was hailed by the press as the story of the world’s first transsexual and the first person to undergo ‘sex reassignment surgery’, there is much evidence Lili was intersex. That is, she had ‘genetic, hormonal and physical features that may be thought to be typical of both male and female at once,’ according to OII Australia. Photographs of Einar Wegener bear that out — he was so feminine that he was abused for being a young woman masquerading as a man when wearing men’s clothes on his errands in the streets of Paris.

Einar and Gerda had moved to France in 1912 to further their careers as painters. Einar had been the famous one in Denmark, but the acclaim for Gerda’s paintings and illustrations far outstripped his, and his career became subordinate to hers.

In fact, it had been that way for years. Einar acquired the name ‘Lili’ when he stood in for one of Gerda’s portrait clients in Copenhagen. ‘Elbe’ came in 1930 when she fell in love with the river of that name that passes through Dresden, then one of the most beautiful, Baroque-style cities of Europe. She had gone to Dresden Municipal Women’s Clinic for her final three surgeries.

Ebershoff sticks to the facts when it comes to how Einar became Lili, but quite rightly uses artistic license when it comes to why. Lili’s memoir, as remarkable as it is, has its limitations. Ebershoff had questions: “What do you do when the person you love changes? How much change can love withstand before your relationship becomes something else?”

About Lili herself, Ebershoff told me, “If no one else has ever done it, and you don’t know what is on the other end, it’s like going to the moon for the first time. She was so courageous to envision a future for herself, a future that no one else had ever achieved,” he added.

When I asked Ebershoff to sign my copy of the 2001 US paperback edition, he wrote a simple phrase that will stay with me for the rest of my life: “With much admiration and respect.” And I knew that he was writing those words not for me alone, but for Lili too, and all of us who must follow unconventional paths to becoming ourselves.

The Danish Girl by David Ebershoff (Allen & Unwin) is out now.