

Review Essay

Crisis or Conundrum: The Problematic Rhetoric of Gender

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Scott. Galloway

Notes on Being a Man: New York, Amsterdam/Antwerp London Toronto Sydney/Melbourne
New Delhi: Simon & Schuster, 2025

Peggy Orenstein

Boys & Sex: Young Men on Hookups, Love, Porn, Consent, and Navigating the New Masculinity
New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020

Jacob Tobia

Before They Were Men: Essays on Manhood, Compassion, and What Went Wrong
New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2025

Richard R. Reeves

Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It
Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2022

Ruth Whippman

Boymom: Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity
New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2024

We seldom hear any critical information about how our society works until it is almost too late. The five books reviewed here represent very different perspectives on the scenarios that cloud our judgement and delay action. Like the blind men in the fable trying to describe an elephant, each draws different conclusions about the beast before us. All have relevant insights about the struggles boys and men face today but own them at the cost of many pertinent others.

What does the widespread and distressful appearance of struggling young men tell us about the surrounding circumstances in today's society, schools and the work world?

The elephant and the blind men who each interpreted only what they felt at their points of contact with the creature offers an analogy that fits the varied contexts referenced in this essay. Although the authors cited record detailed observations and provide relevant reporting, each also sticks strictly to a distinct narrative that overlooks other critical factors behind the increasingly complex challenges faced by many unprepared boys and young men today. The plight they find

themselves in may evoke sympathy or even pity. For feminists, add wariness. Doubtless, everyone faces challenges in this turbulent world. Unfortunately for boys and men many new competitive barriers and old obligations they are being asked to accept come at a high price. For society at large they hinder or mislead an at-risk population too big and diverse to manage.

What Factors Contribute to the Quagmire that Boys and Young Men Find Themselves In?

This essay provides evidence drawn from several perspectives on the problems boys and young men face in a rapidly changing, increasingly hostile social environment. Because of their upbringing where most of the adults who had a hand in it are likely to have been female, they probably feel beholden as well as vaguely resentful for not being better prepared. Men are expected to compete with the people they were once expected to protect. They are given the message they might be superfluous both on the job and in the world. As Jordan Peterson explains, “The rules have changed.” He pinpoints how disruptive of our entire social order this shift must seem. Nor are boys and men the only ones drawn into the resulting confusion.

Jordan Peterson has many opinions on many subjects. Some are quite questionable. But on this glaring shift he appears to be on the mark. Both genders are anxiously taken aback. For the male human beings presumed privileged there seems to be no defence. Most unfortunately, men in high places are almost universally the perpetrators of the egregious scandals catching public attention. Most men are more virtuous and fair-minded than not. But in a certain twisted irony many of them are even worse off than the rogues who intrigue because of as well as despite their rakishness. Even in popular culture as in entertainment or on dating sites the bigger sin is being dull.

And that is what the indolent, underachieving male lacking confidence and marking time is markedly so. This dilemma did not emerge overnight like mushrooms on a damp day. For most men the options are limited. Nothing has prepared them for these gender related challenges exacerbated by concurrent generational, technological and financial threats nobody can control. The dialogues Peggy Orenstein gleaned from the young men she interviewed for *Boys & Sex* demonstrate a less than coherent situational awareness.

What will be the consequences if the basic issues behind this shift are not resolved? How did this gender-based quagmire emerge and why are so many of us, including boys and men themselves, blind-sided by its appearance? What does the widespread and distressful sight of struggling young men tell us about surrounding circumstances in today’s society, schools and the work world? Recent reporting offers evidence the malaise affecting boys and young men is starting to infect other populations considered less vulnerable as well. Do any of these five authors credibly address what is behind the disturbing developments now painfully evident?

Even in popular culture as in entertainment or on dating sites, the bigger sin is being dull.

Let’s briefly look into evidence presented in each of these books to highlight the warning signs and distressing outcomes the authors fear, describe and foresee. I approached these books on their own merits as their authors focus on select core issues, some taking a broader societal

overview with others recalling a more personal examination specifically dependant on their own experiences or where their professional research and chosen positions have taken them.

Peggy Orenstein's compilation of interviews and reflections, *Boys & Sex: Young Men on Hookups, Love, Porn, Consent, and Navigating the New Masculinity* (2020) is the earliest of these works and reflects the repertorial diligence touching on points of interest top of mind half a decade ago. Orenstein admits from the outset that her primary interest continues to be the world that girls and young women enter in light of their changing expectations and circumstances.

Her reason for researching and writing this book was therefore to get a handle on how young male attitudes create the expectations they claim to have respecting their (mostly sexual) relations with young females. Her previous book (2016) was entitled *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape*. Her admission that her main interest has long been and continues to be what's been happening to girls and young women is only fair but leaves gaps today's reader might find a bit frustrating.

Orenstein's basic modus operandi is to interview members of the population she is reporting on then to edit their answers to questions she asks them. She is quite proficient at this sort of reporting, but we must remember her working context. Her reporting has led her into deep exploration of several social justice issues, and she has served these causes. Unfortunately, *Boys and Sex* builds on the shock growing in the wake of the '#MeToo' revelations as exemplified by figures like Harvey Weunstein and Jeffrey Epstein appears to be aimed at skewering the sense of off-hand entitlement that pornography and media at large have influenced some boys to think reveal how normal romantic relationships unfold.

Developmental and circumstantial evidence also supports the conclusion that boys overall are less prepared for what awaits them in this VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world we have thrust them into.

Numerous neuroscience studies and social science research indicate teenage brains struggle with full comprehension. Adolescent boys may exaggerate or distort their accounts of what they actually do or say they would like to. Unaware of the wider consequences, many make comments reflecting what they believe projects a "manly" if also misogynistic image.

Sexual activity is only one area where adolescents take unguarded risks as we all have seen and experienced. Maintaining reputation leads many boys (and girls) into other behaviors they are emotionally too immature to manage. Girls, however, are in general primed from an early age to be most cautious in their sexual and social demeanor for many social and historical reasons. Developmental and circumstantial evidence also supports the conclusion that boys overall are frequently less prepared for what awaits them in this VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world we live in. This gap in mentorship and support contributes to the ongoing crisis faced by young men, as highlighted across all five works discussed in this essay.

Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It by Richard V. Reeves and published in 2022 consolidates his research with the Brookings Institution. The resulting text is pertinent as a sociological, economic and political confirmation that the problem is systemic. Up until recently, popular opinion influenced by lurid incidents seemed to imply either personal deficiency or plain contrariness on the part of the male members who constitute the once and often still privileged half of the population.

Public opinion and the channels that drive it exhibit the attention span of a ferret and the maneuverability of an ocean liner. If that sounds paradoxical it is because like so many forces in our times attention moves at the erratic direction of its own self-generated drivers. It may dwell on a topic until satiated but move like a flash when a more newsworthy one appears. Granted, effective resistance against the centuries of neglect which girls and women and many other marginalized groups were forced to endure has at last found just momentum. But because public attention is always so fleeting, momentum tends to resume its former inertia or reverse direction once new crises pointing to newfound miscarriages of social justice appear. Those who have benefitted from the momentum will do everything they can to prevent its shifting away.

And this motivated resistance is only one real obstacle among many which boys face today. Job opportunities and shifting household roles, biology, cultural priorities, and political obtuseness across society's entire spectrum have obscured the plight of the unprepared young male in today's world. Society is starting to suffer the consequences of its current indifference well before awareness of the consequences reaches a threshold sufficient to trigger an effective response. This is typical of social shifts throughout history. Although hopeful signs are beginning to emerge, cultural lag, regardless of urgency, remains the norm. Sorry boys.

Jacob Tobia's book, *Before They Were Men: Essays on Manhood, Compassion, and What Went Wrong* is in most senses an outlier as is the author. In this book Tobia identifies as male although as a member of the transgender world he could have been described as a she or they. From the text we see that this author does not appear uncomfortable with any gender role either in private or public. Jacob Tobia is a full authentic person recognizing the harm inflicted by constricted roles on all sides of socially enforced divides. Although compelled to live a life of contradictions and paradoxes, here is a singularly uninhibited individual.

But because public attention is so limited, momentum translates into inertia whenever a new crisis pointing to yet another miscarriage of social justice in the gender domain appears.

What's there to lose in Tobia's situation? That is, what bias has he/she not already faced? As a transexual being there was nevertheless a choice as to how the inevitable intolerance would be encountered. This was where after much scrambling and testing Tobia acquired the capacity to recognize that both (or all) genders face significant challenges by just being alive. If anything is more impressive than Jacob Tobia's magnanimity it is the sense of unabashed fun that such a tolerance unleashes.

In Jacob Tobia's complex, inclusive world there's no room for derogatory terms like "toxic masculinity." Not so for Ruth Whippman the author of the most recent of the four books *Boymom: Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity* (2024). As the mother of two boys and a committed public feminist she would find herself torn and tormented. Above all Whippman, and yes, I see the irony in her name, was anxious about the future her two sons would face.

Boymom: Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity was released a little more than a year ago but how the public rhetoric has already changed! Several parts of the world clearly led by the United States have lapsed into backlash against the more strident or even more moderate feminism the *Boymom* author endorses. Deeply concerned like any mother of sons she remains a writer sympathetic to and protective of her male children. The reader can appreciate Whippman's struggle which she articulates after reading about both the monstrous abuses and everyday disrespect so many girlfriends, wives, coworkers and even female celebrities continue to be subjected to. Being a journalist and social critic of her time and place, she could scarcely avoid the constant demonizing coverage of misbehaving men. As she writes in her Introduction, "In the fevered, absolutist climate of #MeToo, it was hard not to start to see men as the enemy."

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All these writers have impressive strengths and skills. Their starting points differ which is engaging though overall not helpful for those seeking a balanced perspective. We may not have been exposed to the influences which drive these authors but can see they each have serious points to make. Each book taken by itself does not negate what the others describe except in this sense: What is missed in the mix by taking any or even all of these perspectives?

The causes of the growing gap between the genders are several. Society seems to have created a "perfect storm" when the more conspicuous factors are added up. These would include the disappearance of jobs favoring men's strengths, missing fathers, male mentors and teachers in the lives of young men, the boomerang mostly unintended impact of affirmative action across the board, and the loss purpose appealing to boys. Media trends include growing cynicism and pessimism, reevaluating historically male figures' achievements, deeper critiques of their roles in colonization, and attitudes towards privilege. Shifting sensitivities often lead to public responses to social issues. Read: "feminine." To be fair, practical, and acceptable, diversity, equity and inclusion have to cut both ways.

This unhealthy situation, steadily incubating for decades, has emerged as a huge issue.

My generation witnessed the great shift from the implicit favoring of boys and men to a breakthrough more positive emphasis on girls and women. I welcomed this before any unintended or contentious consequences appeared. Sadly, for most female human beings, that transition is far from complete with stubborn barriers remaining. As with the children of immigrants, success markers remain a huge priority for today's girls and young women. The amount of stress that creates for them should not be underestimated.

If these books have any weakness in common, it would be insufficient attention paid to social influences on today's boys and men. A recent story in "The Times" cites a bald statement expressing an opinion shared by 78% of women and 43% of men sampled in a recent UK survey, "You must be an alpha male these days to get a partner." Women seem nearly twice as clear as men about men's romantic prospects. Are men anxiously torn lest they appear to either lack confidence or be labeled innately 'toxic'?

Bias exposed can expose the dysfunctions in the system by pointing towards solutions rather than reactively blaming specific individuals for their unconscious prejudices.

Just before this essay was about to be submitted Scott Galloway, the prolific author and New York University professor released his latest book, *Notes on Being a Man*. While his tone is tempered by thoughtful realism it conveys a not inappropriate alarm. Over recent decades, public opinion has undoubtedly undergone a one-sided about face leaving young men and boys previously conditioned to expect certain forms of privilege or indulgence completely stranded. Galloway outlines both the dimensions of the dilemma and a few doable if not totally popular solutions to the fallout. His book's message is backed up by some formidable statistics as you would expect a business school professor to have handy.

Above all, I would say to these authors as well as their readers consider the long-term impact of all the evidence assembled in total. Today's turbulence fluctuates as it moves. Take note of the new emerging circumstances which need to be seen. Ignoring any of them, particularly in their current trajectories, would be unwise. Whoever you are as an individual you are not personally responsible for all that's happening now let alone the past. However, declaring you are, "Just going with the flow" like the "Just following orders" plea is obviously a naïve copout whatever your stance or identity.

The current malaise among languishing boys and men cannot be refuted by either a redress of past grievances or dismissed by rationalized indifference. Gender repression and violence, ignored for decades, has justifiably emerged as a huge global tragedy. With good reason, reaction has been festering for millennia. However, ignoring retaliatory rhetoric or dismissing the quandary of innocent or poorly informed boys and young men will bring serious consequences for a society already overwhelmed by multiple complex challenges. Society has traditionally relied on its young men for protection, preservation and successful resilient families as Scott Galloway reminds us. Without men's whole hearted contribution how well are we prepared for the challenges already at our doorstep? Take artificial intelligence for instance.

Sadly, in the way each of these authors writes you can see that in several decisive respects they use language around the same topics at cross purposes.

Conclusion

The most disturbing parts in all these books point to a sharp divide in the way language, actions and routine gestures are routinely interpreted and misinterpreted along gender, generational and class lines. Boys and girls and the men and women they become are treated and

regarded differently by different researchers, administrators, politicians and institutions. Stereotyping persists. This sensitive subject which hinges on fairness is a double-edged sword cutting sharply through many conversations.

In-groups big and small almost invariably form to favour their own members. Bias exposed also reveals consequential dysfunctions in the system even when it points towards more just solutions rather than reactive blaming of individual factions over their prejudices. Sadly, in the way each of these authors writes you can see that in several decisive respects they use language around the same topics at cross purposes. Despite these divisions there's hope. It's promising to see authors who, regardless of initial inclinations, take this troubling situation seriously. As common concerns multiply productive dialogue will be compelled at some point. Hard cheese for some but, encouraging for the rest of us.

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