

Book Reviews



James Houghton, Larry Bean, and Tom Matlack (eds.), *The Good Men Project: Real Stories From the Frontline of Manhood*. Boston, Massachusetts: The Good Men Foundation, 2009.

For more, see the website for The Good Men Project at: <http://goodmenproject.com/>

David Gilmore in his expertly crafted study of masculinity, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (1992), points out that manhood is nearly ubiquitous in the cultures of the world. Very early on in his book, Gilmore introduces us to the Fox Indians, one of the aboriginal peoples of North America, whose word for manhood translates into English as “the Big Impossible.” Anyone involved in discussions of manhood would do well to remember this fact. With this in mind I undertook a reading of *The Good Men Project*, a collection of thirty-one essays written by “a broad range of men – rich, poor, black, white, gay, straight, urban, rural, famous, [and] ordinary” (from the back cover).

If anyone has had the displeasure of sitting through a gender studies course in contemporary academe, he may be familiar with a kind of class that is run as a sort of self-help group, where mostly young women trade stories of victimhood at the hands of the patriarchy amid rage and tears, while the two or three silent young men in class sweat profusely in their chairs. Luckily for us *The Good Men Project* is not like one of these classes. While a few of the stories delve into that weepy emotionalism, for the most part these essays have, as another reviewer put quite succinctly, “balls.” The

men who wrote these essays are not trying to burden us with their problems or to saturate us with their emotions, but to give us snapshots from the stories of their lives, some of which are able to deliver a devastating emotional payload precisely because of their reserve and dignity. These stories break the great male silence and allow us to start our own analysis.

The book is divided into four sections that attempt to establish a common theme among the essays. The four sections are “Fathers,” “Sons,” “Husbands,” and “Workers.” Before the essays, a poem by Robert Pinsky, *Samurai Song*, sets the mood and hints at what is to come. In English samurai translates to “those who serve in close attendance to the nobility.” It is fitting that we think of modern men in service, for despite the gender liberation of his female counterparts, men still take the historical burden of culture on their back, each an Atlas who cannot, or will not, shrug. Pinsky’s poem, *The Knight’s Prayer*, flanks the essays, showing us another misunderstood historical figure. The knight and his code of chivalry, now incorrectly analyzed as oppressive of women instead of as the genesis of man’s service to her, served as the iron and steel clad bulwark against culture’s enemies.

“Fathers” is a tour through the stories of men as they come to grips with fatherhood, whether they are married or alone. The stories cover the triumph of single fathers successfully raising daughters to the despair of losing children both young and grown. These are not the idiot fathers of television commercials. Their stories are of suffering and joy, brief gasps of authenticity from caricature-driven depictions of masculinity and fathers. Themes of pride in their young daughters and ambivalence between father and son become apparent. In one of the more unnerving stories a new father reflects on how terrible it is to be a male, an evolutionary curse, while looking upon his baby son. I found myself wishing that, more for his son’s sake, this father had not been exposed to so much negativity towards his maleness. The collection of essays on fatherhood drives home the notion that as opposed to the naturalness of motherhood, fatherhood is a cultural creation, and thus a part of the process of manhood.

“Sons” is a collection of essays mainly focusing on the relationship between fathers and sons, with the exception of one man looking back on his relationship with his mother. This section captures a breadth of experiences of sons. Especially captivating was a story about inheriting a family company, a modern tale of dynastic succession that also gives one insight into the human side of the business world. Reading of the importance of fathers in these men’s lives makes one fear for the generations of children growing up without fathers, but also reinforces the importance of a father in the lives of sons both young and old. These relationships all have their own sort of ambivalence. During the latter essays of the section, which focus on sons dealing with dying fathers, I was reminded of Dylan Thomas’ *Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night*: “And you, my father, there on the sad height / Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.” Any father or son stands to benefit from reading these sections. They have a sincerity and honesty that is empowering.

“Husbands” is a look at men in relationship to their significant other. All are about men relating to women but one, which tells the story of one gay man’s search for love in New York City where the landscape of homosexual relationships has changed drastically in the past fifty years. One playful story relates one man’s quest for manhood in a psychedelic haze of marijuana and sex. Rather than appearing as a cad, I got the feeling this man was inching towards a kind of Vedantic self-realization. Sandwiched between two essays of the virtues of being able to talk with one’s spouse are

two devastating stories about death and divorce. One man faces the prospect of losing his young wife to cancer and deals with the guilt of living without her, while another learns to handle the feeling of shame among his coworkers whilst going through a divorce. Besides the devastating essay about one man's dying wife, this section was the weakest. When I had finished it, I could not help wondering about the lack of stories about men who had lost their families and wealth through divorce.

"Workers" tries to capture the different ways in which men now work in a changing economic landscape. Interestingly, the first story recounts the tale of a former news correspondent who becomes a stay-at-home dad and learns that domestic life may be a harsher world than most men realize as well as reporting back on the "nanny culture" of the cities. Another chooses his work as an embedded journalist in some of the worst situations on Earth rather than family life, trying to discover the secret of the silence of his grandfather and father after returning from war. One young man decides to turn his life around after prison, deciding not to fall into the morass of recidivism. The American National Football League hall of famer Andre Tippett gives the book a bit of star power by contributing a charming story of how the discipline of martial arts contributed to his life and his excellent football career. These "workers" present a different picture of work than as alienated labor. Whether in Bengazi or on the football field these men's stories tell of a world of achievement and meaning.

The Good Men Project is an outstanding collection of essays offering men the chance to deepen their understanding of what it is to be a man as well as offering women a chance to understand her compliment. For both it is an insight into the lived male experience, a silent world seeming to find its voice with books like this. What is it to be a good man, to achieve "the Big Impossible"? It is perhaps impossible to achieve manhood; it must always be striven for. As one of the men in the book proclaims after some tribulation: "I was a man that day and would be for the next week. But then after that, I'd have to prove myself again, and again, and again in ways that I couldn't – and still can't – anticipate. To be a man is to be part of an ongoing process" (p. 220).

This process of manhood sustains and drives civilization, and with a better understanding of it than what has been afforded by gender studies literature we may begin to hear more voices such as those in this book. What I took away from it, what it helped confirm, is that I will never achieve that elusive manhood, but all men are united in this with me. The most important theme of the book is that men don't have to apologize for who they are, or who they are trying to be. Our striving is what makes us strong. As one author says: "I'd found a useful role in this world, a way to give evidence that has value. I had nothing to apologize for, nothing I needed to be diagnosed for. Some things in this world just are, and that's all right. They don't need to be satisfactorily resolved" (p. 201).

References

Gilmore, David. *Manhood in the Making*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

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