

AL STEWART

THE  
MANUAL



GETTING  
MASCULINITY  
RIGHT

FOREWORD BY JOHN ANDERSON

Understanding what it means to be male has never been more confusing. As more behaviours are called out for being patriarchal or toxic, how does a man navigate these choppy waters? Is there such a thing as healthy masculinity? Are there any good men out there leading the way?

In *The Manual*, Al Stewart sifts through the current debates and challenges facing men, offering practical wisdom and insights on how to live as a man valued by others. More importantly, he digs into what the Bible has to say about manhood and how being a follower of Jesus is central to loving and serving others.

Combining decades of experience as a son, husband, father, friend and pastor, Al's down-to-earth, no-nonsense, honest approach to life will help any man, young or old, who wants to use his life for good.

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**Al Stewart** lives in Sydney and serves as National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC). He and his wife, Kathy, have four adult children and three grandchildren. He has spent decades speaking with men about life and the difference Jesus makes.

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Al Stewart has given us a robust, humble, vulnerable and straight-talking explanation of the challenges and opportunities for men in our complex and confusing world. For many of us, this is exactly what we need!

**Gary Millar**

Principal, Queensland Theological College

This is a great book! It's full of thoughtful insights that challenge cultural assumptions and give a much better story of what it is to be a man. Inspirational. God's vision for men is powerfully good. A must-read.

**Andrew Heard**

Lead Pastor, EV Church, Erina

Gender confusion and identity lostness is littering our social landscape with an unspeakable toll. Al Stewart's *Manual* is jam-packed with biblical fidelity, cultural astuteness and pastoral sensitivity. It's courageous yet tender. Theologically deep yet accessible. A desperately needed book to rescue men, families, churches and societies for the wholesomeness of life that Jesus beautifully redeems us for. A must for every family and church.

**Christopher Chia**

Senior Pastor, Adam Road Presbyterian Church, Singapore

I'm trying to raise three boys to be men who follow Jesus and give up their lives for the sake of those around them, as well as working with men—young and old—across the country who are striving to do the same. In a sea of confusion as to what it looks like to be a man today, this is the book I'm going to give them from now on. Clear, biblical and desperately needed.

**Derek Hanna**

General Manager, Geneva Push church-planting network

Al Stewart has done us a great service by courageously exploring the minefield of 21st-century masculinity. He engages with popular culture, expert opinion and the Bible, while helpfully bringing to bear decades of accumulated wisdom. I found his definition of healthy masculinity to be an insightful touchstone for my own life and relationships. Over the last

20 years, I have stopped reading books like this because I generally come away discouraged. Not this time. I was still challenged, but I was encouraged, too. I could also immediately think of plenty of people I wanted to give the book to, including my sons, daughter, daughters-in-law, and the men's breakfast group I belong to.

**Paul Harrington**

Senior Pastor, Trinity Network, Adelaide

Al Stewart has boldly gone where angels fear to tread. He has sought to expose toxic masculinity in all its ugliness and replace it with a biblically grounded, Christ-shaped framework. This book is a call for boys (young or old) to be men of God who understand they are empowered to love, serve, and protect others within the context of their God-given relationships. You may not agree with every point Al makes, but you will be seriously challenged and inspired to reconsider a healthy vision of masculinity.

**Ray Galea**

Lead Pastor, Fellowship Church of Dubai

Christian books on masculinity tend to fall into one of two camps. Some are thinly guised Christianized versions of masculinity taken from popular culture and Western stereotypes. And others are so keen to label all masculinity 'toxic' that they leave men feeling inherently worthless. Al's book is neither. In *The Manual*, he builds a compelling case for masculine identity, grounded in Scripture and supported by social, scientific and psychological research. Al is ready to call out the sins of men, the distorting effects of culture, and toxic masculinity. But he does so without throwing the whole project of being a man under the bus in the process. Instead, he gives us a powerful and practical vision of what restored and redeemed masculinity could look like. A great book for men's groups, Bible studies, and fathers to read with their sons. Highly recommended.

**Rory Shiner**

Senior Pastor, Providence Church, Perth

I'm a reluctant reader of men's self-help books. To be honest, Al Stewart is the person who's given me a number of them to read over the years, pushing me to reflect on my work, loving my wife, leading my family and being a better boss. I'd much rather listen to a Jack Reacher novel or get lost in a non-fiction history book. But I found myself quickly moving to the next chapter of *The Manual*. Al has this ability to simply reflect on our current culture and with great care encourage me to man up and make a difference with the people I care about most. Importantly (and as always), he's pushed me to reflect on God's word anew. Like Al, this book is practical. Read it with others. Reflect on it. Put it into practice.

**Scott Sanders**

Executive Director, Reach Australia

As a woman, I think Al Stewart does indeed "get masculinity right". Power used to serve is a theme that runs throughout the book. In an age where men face so many conflicting messages, *The Manual* helpfully paints a picture of what it looks like to be an adult man rather than an adult boy. What a blessing this type of man is to all those around him!

This insightful, enjoyable and easy-to-read book is helpful for young and old, Christians and those who don't yet believe. It highlights how truly following the greatest man shows men their value and gives them purpose in life.

**Sue Harrington**

Board member, Reach Australia

I have loved reading this book. It is firmly biblically grounded. It is packed with practical and carefully applied wisdom. It is full of thorough and well-documented research. At no stage does the author leave the reader crippled by guilt. Grace and gospel incentive drive everything. To cap it all, it is entertaining and fun to read. I will encourage many men and women at St Helen's to read it.

**William Taylor**

St Helen's Bishopsgate, London



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*The Manual*

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## FOREWORD

**O**UR BOYS ARE IN trouble, and they are growing into men who are in trouble.

And when one sex is in trouble, neither sex is doing as well as it could. Western countries are more anxious, divided, distrustful and tribalized than ever, and a big part of the problem—lost and confused men—is largely ignored by those who have the megaphones and the cultural heft in these times.

The raw statistics tell the story. In the United States, for example, men between 25 and 31 are a staggering 66 percent more likely than women to be living with their parents.<sup>1</sup> The US prison population—which increased by more than 700 percent between 1973 and 2013—is 93 percent male and disproportionately young.<sup>2</sup> Every day, 150 workers die from hazardous working conditions, and 92 percent of them are male.<sup>3</sup> By the eighth grade, 41 percent of girls are at least proficient in writing, while only 20 percent of boys are.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, a large study from Britain finds that boys' IQs have dropped by about 15 percent since the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

In their important book *The Boy Crisis*, Warren Farrell and John Gray present us with a confronting diagnosis. They write:

1 W Farrell and J Gray, *The Boy Crisis: Why our boys are struggling and what we can do about it*, BenBella Books, 2018, p 2.

2 Farrell and Gray, *The Boy Crisis*, p 17.

3 Farrell and Gray, *The Boy Crisis*, p 21.

4 Farrell and Gray, *The Boy Crisis*, p 28.

5 Farrell and Gray, *The Boy Crisis*, p 421, n11.

“the most important single crisis in developed countries [is] dad-deprived children, and especially dad-deprived boys”.<sup>6</sup> An astonishing 85 percent of US youths in prison grew up in fatherless homes;<sup>7</sup> 90 percent of US male prisoners are father-deprived, as are 85 percent of mass shooters.

As Farrell and Gray point out, researchers have shown that mothers are good at setting boundaries, but fathers are better at enforcing them. In other words, huge numbers of children are brought up without firm boundaries. They particularly lack the ability to delay gratification—and so make bad short-term choices which limit longer-term flourishing.

Both boys and girls suffer across some fifty areas of life in the absence of a father—health, education, discipline and self-esteem being a few—but boys suffer more severely. And as Farrell and Gray document, when boys are hurt, they hurt us—physically, psychologically and economically.

Even when boys do manage a decent level of educational attainment, they are often less likely to obtain a job and likely to earn less than their female counterparts. In 147 of America’s biggest cities, women in their twenties are not only more likely than men of the same age to find a job as the emerging employment market favours women; they are also earning more than men of the same age.<sup>8</sup>

In Australian society, young men are under-represented in Australian university enrolments, with females accounting for 58 percent of all students in 2016.<sup>9</sup> The proportion of female postgraduates is even higher. Sadly, men are significantly over-

6 Farrell and Gray, *The Boy Crisis*, p 102.

7 Farrell and Gray, *The Boy Crisis*, p 120.

8 Farrell and Gray, *The Boy Crisis*, p 120.

9 FP Larkins, *Male students remain underrepresented in Australian universities. Should we be concerned?*, University of Melbourne website, 2018, accessed 25 October 2021 ([melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute/insights/gender-enrolment-trends-flarkins](http://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute/insights/gender-enrolment-trends-flarkins)).

represented in the suicide rate. In 2017, 2,348 Australian men took their own lives.<sup>10</sup> This figure was up a massive 10 percent on 2016 and is *three times* the female suicide rate.<sup>11</sup> Men are also dramatically over-represented in the Australian prison population: Corrective Services Australia reported in 2021 that 92 percent of the prison population was male (39,768 inmates).<sup>12</sup>

It is a good thing that so many young women are doing well, of course, but it is producing even more confusion in the minds of young men. What place is there for the protector–provider instincts that are so deeply embedded in men? And how are they to respond when they come to feel that their masculinity is not only seen by many as toxic, but something that is in and of itself toxic? Many spiral downwards into depression, anxiety and addiction of various kinds—all too often on the road to prison or, worse, self-harm.

Al Stewart understands very well what is happening. He cares deeply about every wasted and damaged life, and he sees the factors creating the mess. He has written an extremely accessible and very readable ‘manual’ for men trying to break free from their failings and inadequacies and become the best they can.

Importantly, he in no way excuses bad behaviour. Indeed, he condemns it—but in offering solutions he does a very effective and much-needed demolition job on bad solutions. It is madness to try and imply, as so many do today, that masculinity is by definition toxic. Rather, as Al confirms, true masculinity is as wonderful and important as true femininity.

As he puts it: “Masculinity is fundamentally about *how* men

10 G Poole, *Male suicides in Australia up 10 per cent in 2017*, Australian Men’s Health Forum website, 2019, accessed 25 October 2021 ([amhf.org.au/male\\_suicides\\_in\\_australia\\_up\\_10\\_in\\_2017](http://amhf.org.au/male_suicides_in_australia_up_10_in_2017)).

11 Poole, *Male suicides in Australia up 10 per cent in 2017*.

12 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Corrective Services, Australia*, ABS website, June 2021, accessed 25 October 2021 ([abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/corrective-services-australia/jun-quarter-2021](http://abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/corrective-services-australia/jun-quarter-2021)).

use their power. When it is done in a healthy way, masculinity will serve and bless those it touches.” He quotes Steve Biddulph, who observes that “boys care about themselves” while “men care about others”. And he makes the telling observation that he has met 50-year-old boys and 18-year-old men.

We must break the cycle of lostness and brokenness in our boys and our men, and better fathering and father-figuring is a vital key to this imperative. Al Stewart makes a most exceptional father figure, as I see it, and this book is a must-read, a must-ponder-over, for it is truly insightful, wise and practical.

The Hon John Anderson AO FTSE  
Former Deputy Prime Minister of Australia

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To the men of Bridge Street Fellowship:

Thanks for your patience as I've spoken about  
these topics over the years, and for your wisdom as  
we've sharpened one another.

“Iron sharpens iron,  
and one man sharpens another.”  
(Proverbs 27:17, HCSB)

## INTRODUCTION

**I**T MAY SEEM STRANGE to begin a book with an apology, but I wish I could apologize in person to the young man who asked me a question at a men's convention in 2017. I was one of the speakers in a question-and-answer session, and in a room of more than 100 blokes he asked, "What does it mean to be a man? Today it seems so confusing, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

At the time I didn't take his question seriously, and instead I answered him in clichés about 'masculine' activities and attitudes. I'm sorry. I hope he picks up this book, because it's an attempt to answer his question and the question of so many young men I speak to: How do I live a life of healthy masculinity?

As I try to do this, I want to be up front with you. It's inevitable that in the following pages my crusty-old-bloke perspectives are going to shine through. I have been known to have a rant every now and then. But please remember: the fact that they're old and crusty doesn't mean they're necessarily wrong. Our own views on gender—and, in this case, masculinity—are so shaped by our background and experiences that it's impossible to be completely objective about these matters. This is as true for you as it is for me. We all have our own blind spots and assumptions. So I'll try to be honest about what my personal opinions are, and trust you'll be discerning enough to weigh up what I have to say.

Wading into the gender wars between progressives and con-

servatives, between feminists and men's rights groups, is about as inviting as sticking your head into a bag full of angry cats. But my goal isn't to fight that battle, or to resolve the gender, transgender, and no-gender problems. My goal is more concrete than that and, I think, more achievable. I want to talk to you, the man reading this book, about what it means to live a life that is spiritually healthy, filled with strength and power and purpose. I want to talk about what it means to 'man up'.

Does that sound a bit dodgy to you? A bit toxic, perhaps? Well, let me tell you what I mean by that.

'Power' is a tricky word today, and we're rightly suspicious of people who crave it. But what I mean by 'power' is *the ability or opportunity to care for those around you*. I want you to be aware of the power you have to make a positive difference in the world. You might affect only a small part of the world, but you will make a real difference in the part of the world that matters most to you—the place where you live with the people you care about. To man up there will make a huge difference to those closest to you, because whatever strength you possess will be directed towards caring for them.

Here's what the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* tells us it means to 'man up':

**man up** (informal):

*to start being brave or strong in order to deal with a difficult situation*

But this definition only supplies part of the picture. To genuinely man up in the way that I'm talking about will cost you. To put it another way, a life of healthy masculinity will always have a self-sacrificial element to it. It might feel like a crunch in gears at first, but healthy masculinity and love go together because real



love means putting other people before yourself. Real love involves caring for the people around you, and that takes effort. It will cost you time, money, sleep and a thousand other things. It will require discipline, self-control and self-denial. Yet it will be a life in which you know who you are, and what matters to you. You'll live like a man who's worked out what matters and *who* matters, and you'll put that knowledge into practice in well-thought-out ways every day. That's the sort of power I'd like to see operating in your life.

More than that, though, I want you to have a life of purpose. It's no good having the grit and determination to powerfully love those around you if you lack a compass to guide your efforts. And when I talk about a life of purpose, I want to look at what it means to live in the way that God our Creator wants us to live. If you're not a follower of Jesus, wouldn't it make sense to look at what the most influential man who ever lived wants men to be like? If you are already one of his followers, you'll know that he's definitely worth listening to—in fact, he's worth giving your life to. But if you're not there yet—if you're still kicking tyres and rubbing your chin about Jesus and this idea of faith—that's okay too. I hope this book helps you not only to become a powerful, purpose-filled man, but also to see what the Bible says about being Jesus' man, and why that's the best way to live.



So how does *The Manual* work?

In the first six chapters, I look at masculinity in our world—at the confusion in our society around what masculinity really is, at the devaluing of masculinity, and then at what our Creator says about healthy masculinity. I've included two chapters on how to look after 'future you' and on the power of the ordinary, day-by-day life.

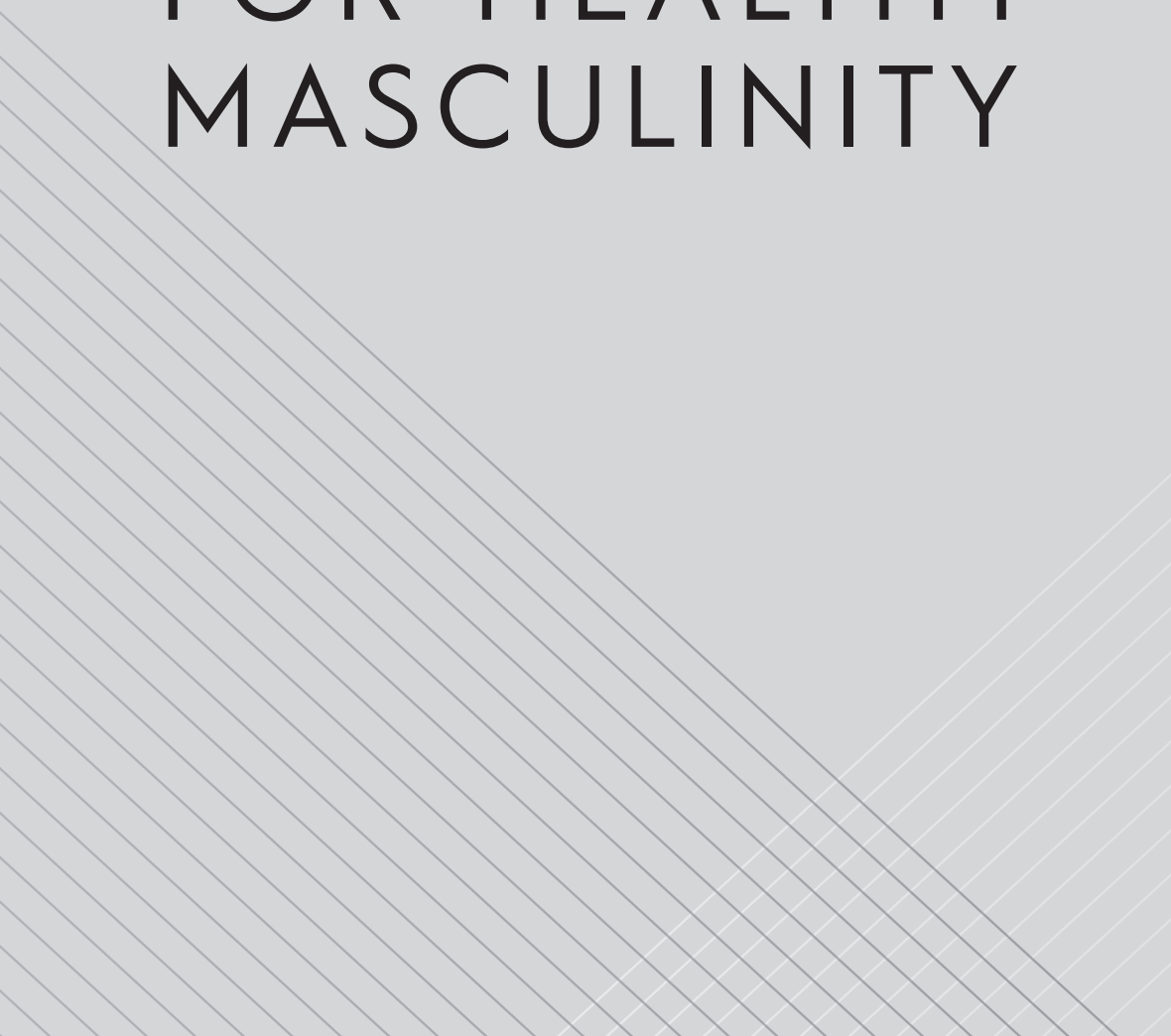
In the next six chapters, I look at the specifics of living as a man. My focus switches to the different roles that men have (such as son, friend or husband) and how we express healthy masculinity in those roles as we invest in the lives of others. Even if not all of these chapters apply to you right now, I'd still urge you to read them all (though it's fine to jump around a bit and start with the ones that are most relevant to you). For one thing, it will help you understand what life is like for other men around you. More importantly, all these chapters work together to give an overall picture of healthy masculinity. This book has a long-term aim: to help shape us into the kind of men who understand God's idea of manhood as presented in the Bible, and to help us grab hold of God's wisdom for living as men. Each of these chapters will, I hope, give you a piece of that puzzle.

At the end of the book, I look at what it means to follow the greatest man, Jesus Christ, and so find life now and in eternity.

PART ONE



# THE SEARCH FOR HEALTHY MASCULINITY





# 1. MASCULINITY: CONFUSION REIGNS

A FEW YEARS AGO, I arranged a once-in-a-lifetime hunting trip to Cape York (the pointy end of Queensland) with my Dad and my brother. We were going to spend a week hunting feral pigs on a cattle station that's spread across almost 3,000 square kilometres—think of something the size of greater Sydney but with just a handful of people living there. We had to fly to the property on the weekly mail plane from Cairns, which is about 600 km away. When we landed on the property's airstrip around mid-morning we were met by Bob, who was about the same age as my Dad and who ran the hunting and safari business for soft city boys like us. As our gear and the station's weekly groceries were being unloaded from the plane, the property owner, Dave, pulled up on a motorbike. Just behind him, another bloke pulled up in a beat-up, open-top four-wheel drive. Dave, with his mane of shaggy hair and black bushy beard, was approximately the same size and shape as a grizzly bear. He was also barefoot. He looked the three of us up and down and said with a lazy smile, "G'day". When he saw I was looking at his choice of footwear, he said, "Yeah, I spilled acid on my boots a few weeks ago and I haven't gone into town yet to pick up another pair".<sup>1</sup>

Dave explained that he and the driver of the four-wheel drive

1 I've changed the names of Bob and Dave to protect their privacy and also my life.

(who was even bigger than Dave) had been out that day catching scrub bulls. Scrub bulls are feral cattle that have been wild for generations. The way Dave and his mate caught them, I'm told, is pretty standard. You take a four-wheel drive, or a quad bike if a four-wheel drive isn't available, and strap old tyres to the bull bar. You chase the bull through the bush at high speed until it's exhausted, then knock it over. While the bull is trying to get up, you jump out and tie its back legs together. Then you tie it by the horns to a tree and untie its back legs. Simple, right? Later on, you come back with a truck to pick up all the bulls you've caught, dragging them into the truck with a winch. Then it's off to the cattle yard. Once the yard is full, a semitrailer comes out and loads them up for the long trip to the sale yards. Catching scrub bulls is not for the fainthearted.

So that was our welcome to Cape York.

One night, about halfway through our trip, we were having dinner in the huge corrugated iron shed where we slept each night. There were six of us around the trestle table: Bob, Dave, Dave's giant mate (whose day job was flying around in a helicopter shooting feral animals in the nearby national park), my brother, my Dad, and me. We had just eaten a bucketload of spaghetti bolognese (and I do mean a bucket—they'd used a 20-litre tub to cook it all). There was a forest of empty beer bottles on the table, and six sauce-smearred plates. With a full belly and a beer in hand, Dave looked at us three visitors and asked, "So, what do you blokes do for a living?" After a pause, my father leaned forward and slowly answered, "Well, I'm a retired prison officer. Mark is a carpenter. And Alan is ..." Dad looked up and our eyes met above the beer bottles. The look on his face told me he didn't know what else to say. He shrugged and looked apologetic. "Alan is an Anglican minister."

I had not been aware of the crickets chirping outside until that moment. As we sat in silence, I wondered what it was I'd really

wanted my father to say. Maybe “Alan is an officer in the SAS”, or “Alan works on an oil rig”, or “Alan is a champion rodeo rider”. There was so much testosterone in the air that night that it felt like I needed a job masculine enough for me to keep my man-card.

But is that really what masculinity is? Is it being tough? Strong? Is it being able to wrestle wild cattle? Does it only come in one shape? How do you actually get your man-card, and how do you keep it? What does it really look like to man up?

## **The great confusion**

Leonard Sax is a medical doctor and psychologist with a bachelor’s degree in biology, a PhD in psychology, and years of experience in patient care. He is deeply concerned about what’s happening in our society at the moment in the area of gender:

One hundred years from now, scholars may look back at the cultural disintegration manifest in the first half of the twenty-first century and conclude that a fundamental cause of the unravelling of our social fabric was the neglect of gender in the raising of our children. I wonder what those future historians will say about how long it took us to recognize our mistake, to realize that what girls need is different from what boys need—to understand that gender matters.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not historians will be pondering our cultural disintegration in a hundred years, I can’t say. I do suspect, though, that the average person will wonder whether there was something in the water that was making us crazy. Few topics have generated such heat or confusion as the 21st-century debates over sex,

2 L Sax, *Why Gender Matters: What parents and teachers need to know about the emerging science of sex differences*, 2nd edn, Harmony Books, 2017, p 314.

gender and male–female relations. There are too many examples to list here, but let’s highlight a few to make the point.

In December 2018, tennis legend and LGBTI ambassador Martina Navratilova “stumbled into a hornets’ nest”<sup>3</sup> (to use her own words) when she made the following statement about biological males participating in women’s sport: “Clearly that can’t be right. You can’t just proclaim yourself a female and be able to compete against women. There must be some standards, and having a penis and competing as a woman would not fit that standard.”<sup>4</sup> Navratilova was smashed on social media for making this ‘outrageous’ claim, and subsequently apologized for any offence given.

In 2019, a Canadian court ruled against Jonathan ‘Jessica’ Yaniv, a transgender woman who made international news by bringing discrimination complaints against 15 female beauty technicians who refused to wax his male genitals. The court ruled that the beauty technicians had the right to refuse to deal with male genitalia, because “human rights legislation does not require a service provider to wax a type of genitals they are not trained for and have not consented to wax”.<sup>5</sup>

The gender debate has become so fraught that the play *The Vagina Monologues* has been banned at some women’s colleges in the USA, because it is now argued that “a play about women who have vaginas excludes transwomen, who don’t have vaginas”.<sup>6</sup>

It’s not just about the potential offence that can now be caused by defining genders. The very concepts of male and female are

3 Starts at 60 Writers, ‘Martina Navratilova apologises for transgender “cheat” comments’, *Starts at 60*, 4 March 2019, accessed 7 January 2022 ([starts60.com/discover/news/martina-navratilova-apologises-for-transgender-women-in-sport-comments](https://starts60.com/discover/news/martina-navratilova-apologises-for-transgender-women-in-sport-comments)).

4 J Vigo, ‘Confronting a new threat to female athletics’, *Quillette*, 27 February 2019, accessed 7 January 2022 ([quillette.com/2019/02/27/confronting-a-new-threat-to-female-athletics](https://quillette.com/2019/02/27/confronting-a-new-threat-to-female-athletics)).

5 *Yaniv v Various Waxing Salons (No. 2)* [2019] BCHRT 222 [British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal decision] at 15, accessed 7 January 2022 ([bchrt.bc.ca/law-library/decisions/2019/oct.htm](https://bchrt.bc.ca/law-library/decisions/2019/oct.htm)).

6 Sax, *Why Gender Matters*, p 289.



under attack by academics, as we can see in the following example:

Judith Butler is a professor at the University of California at Berkeley. She believes that we should challenge the “traditional” division of the human race into male and female. In the name of personal freedom, Professor Butler encourages individuals to construct their own gender identity, without regard to their biological sex. According to Butler, notions such as “boy” and “girl,” “man” and “woman,” “father” and “mother” are all mere inventions of a sexist society created in order to support the patriarchy and ‘heteronormativity’—the preference for straight people over gay and lesbian people (Butler herself is a lesbian).<sup>7</sup>

So while some are debating the differences between the genders, others seem to be questioning their very existence. In fact, there seems to be a concerted push to dissolve the concept of gender difference altogether, especially where appearance is concerned. For example, it seems that more and more men now dress in traditionally feminine ways. American internet personality James Charles has over 24 million subscribers to his YouTube channel, which shows James applying make-up to himself with a distinctly feminine result.<sup>8</sup> Or there’s Clementine Ford, a feminist author based in Melbourne, who says she wants to raise her son to choose sparkly shoes and wear a dress if he chooses: “To the boys who want butterflies painted on their cheeks, the boys who twirl in dresses and the boys who always pick the sparkly shoes: we can do this together. Are you ready? Love, Mummy.”<sup>9</sup>

Is it any wonder so many young blokes are confused?

7 Sax, *Why Gender Matters*, pp 282-283.

8 See, for example, J Charles, ‘Holiday slay makeup tutorial’ [video], *James Charles*, YouTube, 22 November 2017, accessed 7 January 2022 ([youtube.com/watch?v=BQC09Mdn24w](https://youtube.com/watch?v=BQC09Mdn24w)).

9 C Ford, *Boys Will Be Boys: Power, patriarchy and the toxic bonds of mateship*, Allen & Unwin, 2018, p 364.

## The results of our confusion

Leonard Sax has lived in the eye of this storm for decades. He has seen, diagnosed and helped thousands of boys and girls of all ages (as well as their families) to grapple with the gender issue. His experience and study has led him to the view that:

We do no one any favors by pretending that these male/female differences do not exist. Ignoring reality always comes at a cost ...

Gender is more fragile than we knew. Though perhaps we should have known better. Most cultures have taken great care in teaching gender norms. We no longer do. On the contrary, our learned professors now actively deconstruct and tear down every gender guidepost, in the name of individual liberty, with no awareness of the costs. We need to be careful about the norms we teach, of course. We don't want to perpetuate stereotypes like the dumb jock or the dumb blonde. We need to create new ideals of manhood and womanhood that make sense in the twenty-first century. But "personhood" won't fly. Boys don't want to be "persons." Neither do girls. Boys want to be men. Girls want to be women. We have to teach them what that means.<sup>10</sup>

By "personhood", I take it that Dr Sax means human identity without reference to gender, or with the concept of gender removed. His conclusion is that gender is a key part of our identity as humans, and pretending it isn't, in his own words, "won't fly".

As if to underline Dr Sax's thesis, there is a growing problem in many countries relating to disengaged young men. In Japan, there are a large number of boys who are mockingly known as 'herbivores' (*soshokukei danshi*):

<sup>10</sup> Sax, *Why Gender Matters*, pp 282, 288.

Herbivores spend almost as much on cosmetics and clothes as women. One company alone (WishRoom) has sold more than five thousand *bras* to these boys. Herbivores, also called “parasite singles” (*parasaito shinguru*), are typically apathetic about careers, dating, sex, and marriage. The herbivore typically lives with his parents. He is especially close to his mom.

This trend of maternal closeness and dependency is increasingly common throughout Western Europe. In Germany boys may be derided as nest-sitters (*Nesthocker*) for living at “Hotel Mama”; in Italy boys increasingly return home at their mother’s encouragement, even as they (and sisters who accompany them) may be mocked as *bamboccioni* (big babies). In Greece and Spain, the youth unemployment rate exceeds 50 percent (versus 12 percent for US youth), replacing millions of young men’s traditional sense of purpose with a sense of dependency.<sup>11</sup>

Some of us may be wondering if these boys mentioned above are a little short on testosterone. Testosterone is a controversial subject these days, and a full discussion of its effects on the male body and male behaviour is beyond the scope of this book. Instead, I’ll offer a brief summary of Carole Hooven’s scientifically thorough book, *Testosterone*. Hooven explains the science behind what many people might regard as common knowledge or even common sense—namely, the huge effect that testosterone has on the bodies and lives of boys and men.

Hooven summarizes as follows:

11 Farrell and Gray, *The Boy Crisis*, pp 56–57 (emphasis original). See also H Mirafiori, ‘Japan: Herbivore men who sit when the [sic] pee emerge as economy worsens’, *Economy Watch*, 18 June 2009, accessed 7 January 2022 (economy watch.com/2009/06/18/japan-herbivore-men-who-sit-when-the-pee-emerge-as-economy-worsens).

The effects of T [testosterone] are deep and wide-ranging. Boys' preference for rough-and-tumble play and men's motivation to compete with other men, their greater libido and preference for sexual novelty, and their athletic advantage over women are all testosterone derived. ... T levels in healthy men and women do not come close to overlapping: men's are 10-20 times those of women. In puberty, the gap in testosterone level is even wider—pubertal boys have about thirty times as much testosterone as girls.<sup>12</sup>

The effects of those higher levels of testosterone span the extremes—from terrible violence to heroic sacrifice:

Although the ratios for each country vary, men commit about 90 percent of physical assaults [injuring another person on purpose] but only about 80 percent of thefts [when the theft involves more physical risk, like stealing a car or breaking into a home, the number is higher].<sup>13</sup>

So men are more likely to commit violent crime. But men are also more likely to risk their lives in trying to save others, even strangers. Hooven gives the example of the Carnegie Hero Medal:

Since 1904, in the United States and Canada about ten thousand people have been awarded the Carnegie Hero Medal, which goes to a civilian who voluntarily risks his or her own life knowingly, to an extraordinary degree while saving or attempting to save the life of another person. ... About ten percent have gone to women. Recipients have saved people from drowning, from house fires, from animal attacks, and so on.<sup>14</sup>

12 C Hooven, *Testosterone: The story of the hormone that dominates and divides us*, Cassell, 2021, p 246.

13 Hooven, *Testosterone*, p 165.

14 Hooven, *Testosterone*, p 242.

Hooven analyses at some length writers (especially journalists) who wish to deny testosterone's effects on the male brain and male physiology. She says that this reluctance to accept the natural and physical explanation is because of the "naturalistic fallacy". Hooven quotes scientist and author Steven Pinker, who explains that this fallacy is based on a false view of 'nature'—"the belief that 'whatever happens in nature is good'". But Hooven continues: "It's not called a 'fallacy' for nothing. 'Natural diseases' like malaria are not in any way good. Nature is full of wonderful things, but it's also full of truly awful things."<sup>15</sup>

Hooven also explains that even though testosterone may tend to make men more violent or aggressive, they are still very much responsible for their actions. She speaks about her own son's journey into puberty and finishes the book with this insight:

Because of the testosterone that he is on the way to producing, Griffin will likely differ from most women in many of the ways I've described in this book. Becoming a man is a beautiful thing. But—like every man—my son should enjoy his testosterone responsibly.<sup>16</sup>

So men are capable of great good and great evil, and every man must make his own decisions about how he will act. I still remember sitting with the front page of *The Australian* newspaper in front of me in early 2019 and reading about the award given to Drs Richard Harris and Craig Challen for their work in Thailand in 2018. The headline read as follows: 'Bravery of selfless, dedicated Thai cave rescuers earns joint honour'. The article was about the rescue of 12 teenagers and their soccer coach who were trapped by floodwaters in an underground river system, and about the two Australian cave divers who played a vital role

15 Hooven, *Testosterone*, p 253.

16 Hooven, *Testosterone*, p 260.

in that rescue. For their courage, skill and self-sacrifice, they had been jointly awarded ‘Australian of the Year’.<sup>17</sup>

But just underneath that story sat a second and equally prominent headline: ‘Alcoholic squatter arrested over Aiiia’. Codey Herrmann, a 20-year-old would-be rap artist, had been charged with the rape and murder of 21-year-old exchange student Aiiia Maasarwe in Bundoora, Melbourne. Next to the article was a chilling picture he had posted of himself on Facebook—half smiling, with glassy teddy-bear eyes and a can of Jack Daniels in his hand—just hours after he’d killed Aiiia. Our nation mourned over this senseless crime. The story told of how Aiiia’s father had planned a trip from Israel to Australia to visit his daughter, a journey he now had to make with a broken heart.

Together, these two articles vividly illustrate the best and the worst men can be. How we make sense of them—the narrative we find most compelling—will depend on our worldview and our perception of masculinity. Some of us will want to emphasize the strong, protective and competent male; others will see confirmation that all men are potential predators. Perhaps we should see that men are capable of both of these extremes.

A few pages from now, we’ll look at the label ‘toxic masculinity’ and the understandable but wrong response, which is to weaken or dilute concepts of masculinity within our culture. Here’s the irony, though: weakness is actually the source of the problem with masculinity. Ask yourself: In the newspaper stories above, who is the strong man and who is the weak one? To quote Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, “If you think tough men are dangerous, wait until you see what weak men are capable of”.<sup>18</sup> The big or physically strong man who is aggressive or

17 This event has now been made into a movie, *Thirteen Lives* (2022), directed by Ron Howard and starring Viggo Mortensen, Colin Farrell and Joel Edgerton.

18 JB Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An antidote to chaos*, Penguin Books, 2018, p 332.

intimidates other people, the man who throws his weight around, is actually a very weak man where it really matters: in heart and character. Men become dangerous not because their masculinity is toxic but because their *humanity* is. These men lack the sense of purpose and the moral framework that show them how to use their strength well.

In short, the answer is not to weaken men, but to help them grow stronger.

But before we throw ourselves into that touchy subject, let's look at how the definition of masculinity has changed in recent times.

## **The wrong sort of masculinity**

There are plenty of wrong definitions of masculinity. Sometimes it's measured by how much grog a bloke can drink, or how many 'f-bombs' he can fit into a sentence.<sup>19</sup> A generation ago, tattoos were seen as the mark of true masculinity. But these days there are more tatts on show in a young mums' playgroup than at a bikie convention. Physical size and strength have also been up there as marks of a 'real man', but are they really reliable markers of masculinity? I've known big men with little hearts, and small men who are giants in terms of courage and character.

Joe Ehrmann is a champion American football player. He was and still is a big dude: 1.93 m and 115 kg (6' 4", 250 lb). He played in the NFL for 14 years and he's now around 70 years old. In a book inspired by his career, *Season of Life*, he speaks about the myths that men begin imbibing from as early as seven years of age, including the following components of what he calls a "false masculinity":

1. athletic ability that highlights size and strength
2. sexuality that uses women to gratify personal needs

<sup>19</sup> 'Grog' is Australian slang for alcohol.

3. economic success where self-worth is equated with net worth.<sup>20</sup>

Mr Ehrmann is exactly right. As I said above, I've known men who are big and strong and yet had hearts the size of a pea. A man who uses size and strength to intimidate other people is a very small man indeed. Further, all the sexual 'conquests' in the world are not worth comparing to the intimacy a man creates when he keeps his lifelong promise to be faithful and intimate with just one woman. And, ironically, the man who measures himself by the size of his bank balance will never have enough money to seem big in his own eyes.

So if that's false masculinity, how are we to properly understand true or healthy masculinity? And why does the quest to do so often feel like it's being undervalued?

Our culture has changed dramatically in my lifetime, and many of those changes were undoubtedly needed. Attitudes towards women and the opportunities they are afforded needed drastic revision. Thankfully, we've seen some gains. I have three daughters who have been able to pursue whatever career they chose and had the ability to undertake. I realize I'm a proud dad so I won't bore you by going on about it, but my girls have all done well in the areas they have chosen. They have grown up in an age which has increasingly aimed to redress the gender imbalance, and they have benefited accordingly. There's a whole range of things we take for granted now that were not open to my mum's generation, such as access for women to tertiary education, bank loans not needing to be in a husband's name, equal pay for equal work, and even a whole range of sporting options. We still have a way to go in all this, but real progress has been made.

Feminism as a cultural and political movement has been the

20 J Marx, *Season of Life: A football star, a boy, a journey to manhood*, Simon & Schuster, 2004, pp 35-36, 71-73.



engine that has powered many of these gains. But the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes has also ushered in some changes that have not been quite so beneficial. For example, the narrative that "You can have it all!"—a stellar career, a deep and satisfying marriage, children (and quality time to nurture them), *and* sleep—has made for a generation of very tired people. (Inevitably, this is affecting women disproportionately, because too often men are abdicating their share of family duties and women are having to pick up the difference while also working in a paid job outside the home.) Sadly, increased freedom and independence for women has meant a diminishing of men's sense of obligation to care for and commit to their partners. The vast majority of single parents are women, who are much more likely to live in poverty.<sup>21</sup> I'm not criticizing the single mums at all; I'm just saying I think they've ended up with the rough end of the pineapple. It's very tough to raise kids on your own.

It seems to me that some women's rights advocates in recent times have seen gender 'equalization' as a zero-sum game—that is, in order to lift women up, you need to pull men down. Certainly in popular culture, in a slow death by a thousand cuts, the masculine 'brand' has been steadily undermined and trashed. Unhealthy representations of masculinity have crept more and more into books, songs, movies, television shows, podcasts and more. To take just one example, look at something as mundane as the television sitcom dad. Let me show you in seven TV shows how things have changed over the past fifty years, to highlight the downhill trend in how men are presented.

*The Brady Bunch* was a popular TV show, originally airing from 1969 to 1974, about the perfect blended family. The dad, Mike Brady, has his faults: he wears flares and has his hair

21 A Sebastian and I Ziv, *One in eight families: Australian single mothers' lives revealed*, Council of Single Mothers and their Children, 2019, accessed 7 January 2022 ([csmc.org.au/publications/national-survey](http://csmc.org.au/publications/national-survey)).

permed in the final season. But it was the 70s; we can forgive him. More importantly, Mr Brady is engaged with his family. He is the wise go-to man who is ultimately charged with sorting out the problems in his family's life.

Another positive father role model from the same time period was Howard Cunningham of *Happy Days*. He loves his family and is an ever-present source of stability in the weekly chaos created by Richie and the Fonz. Howard is the non-anxious, wise presence that the family needs.

It only takes a handful of years, though, for things to take a downward turn. In 1987, Al Bundy made his debut in our living rooms. *Married with Children* introduced us to a husband who is, not to put too fine a point on it, a useless slob. Then, only two years later, Homer Simpson arrived with the first episode of *The Simpsons*. Homer is well meaning and at least tries to engage with his family—but, let's be honest, he is entirely clueless. To quote Leonard Sax again:

[Homer] is always an idiot, reliably a klutz, consistently the least intelligent character in any episode, with the possible exception of his son, Bart, or the family dog. By contrast, Homer's wife, Marge, is generally practical, although sometimes silly. The most intelligent character is usually the daughter Lisa, who routinely ignores her father's advice, because his advice is often hysterically awful.<sup>22</sup>

In most of the more than 700 episodes so far, it's fair to say Homer is usually part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

The next man to take the prominent TV-dad baton is Raymond Barone from *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005). Once again, the male character is thoughtless, stupid and useless. Jour-

22 L Sax, *Boys Adrift: The five factors driving the growing epidemic of unmotivated boys and underachieving young men*, Basic Books, 2007, p 221.

nalist Alison Cameron nails it when she describes the lazy male stereotyping:

[Ray] is a thoughtless husband and a poor father interested only in television, food and sex. Cue laughter.

He is a stereotyped manchild who spends much of his time trying to shirk his responsibilities.

In one show while trying to extricate himself from some parental duties he says to his wife: “You’re so great with the kids, you know what to do. If it were up to me they’d be eating cereal for dinner and wearing the boxes.”<sup>23</sup>

It seems not everybody loves Raymond, though it has certainly been a popular show.

By the time we reach 2003, with the advent of *Family Guy*, things have become much worse. Peter Griffin, the head of this particular family, is basically Homer Simpson without any of his redeeming qualities. The result is a totally useless human being ... er, animated character.

Present-day productions haven’t relented on the man-brand trashing. Consider the impression of fatherhood we get from *Peppa Pig*. Enormously popular with little kids, this highly successful show has a particular way of portraying Daddy Pig. Surprise, surprise, it’s not pretty, as is so eloquently pointed out in *Esquire Magazine*:

Daddy Pig is a bespectacled pink blob with a booming voice and bum-fluff whiskers.

An unqualified disaster when it comes to map reading, DIY and barbecues, three of the skills men might traditionally expect to possess, his favourite pastimes are lying on

23 A Cameron, ‘Everybody loves lazy stereotyping of male roles’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 April 2005, accessed 7 January 2022 ([smh.com.au/national/everybody-loves-lazy-stereotyping-of-male-roles-20050411-gdl3r0.html](http://smh.com.au/national/everybody-loves-lazy-stereotyping-of-male-roles-20050411-gdl3r0.html)).

the sofa watching television, sitting in the sun reading a newspaper and eating vast quantities of chocolate cake.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly the well-worn cliché of male uselessness is alive and well. What makes this myopic swine different from his bumbling cartoon father predecessors, though, is that he appears in a format aimed squarely at children aged 2-5. Such examples have led Kathleen Parker, author of *Save the Males*, to ask:

What message are [children] absorbing today when nearly every TV father is either absent or absurd? Or when children are always smarter and wiser than the old man? Not to exaggerate the influence of a single show or episode, but over time, negative stereotyping is absorbed into the culture, and the message is that men are not only bad, they're stupid and unreliable.<sup>25</sup>

So there you have it: a short history of the television sitcom dad's downward spiral. Now, I'm aware that this trend has its outliers. Archie Bunker (*All in the Family*, 1971-1979) was a racist bigot and pig-headed husband fifty years ago; and the much more recent Australian children's show *Bluey* portrays a dad who is both wise and engaged. But my overall point is to show the clear trend in how men, and particularly dads, are portrayed on TV.

And television is not the only culprit; it's just the most obvious one. When my kids were young, I'd read stories to them each night. One series I picked up was called *The Berenstain Bears*—a series of clever, nicely illustrated stories that deliver plenty of laughs. Look closely, though, and you'll notice that the dad is the fool at the centre of most of the jokes. He's like one of the kids, or

24 D Davies, 'What Peppa Pig tells us about British fatherhood', *Esquire*, 17 June 2014, accessed 7 January 2022 ([esquire.com/uk/culture/news/a6519/has-peppa-pig-got-fatherhood-spot-on](https://www.esquire.com/uk/culture/news/a6519/has-peppa-pig-got-fatherhood-spot-on)).

25 K Parker, *Save the Males: Why men matter; why women should care*, Random House, 2010, p 18.

worse, and regularly part of the problem rather than the solution. It's usually the mum who has to save the day and cover up for her husband's stupidity. Eventually I stopped reading these books to my kids. I may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but I'm smart enough to realize it's not a good idea to read books to your children that teach them dads are idiots. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, but popular culture very often presents men and fathers as incompetent fools.

And things get even worse when masculinity itself is attacked as being 'toxic'.