

The best books of the week

FT Books Essay **Books**

The masculinity crisis

Three books examine the challenges — from schoolyard to workplace — faced by boys and men as they adapt to their changing status in the modern world

Stephen Bush 15 HOURS AGO



The crowd at a Donald Trump midterm campaign rally in Georgia for gubernatorial candidate Brian Kemp in 2018 © Redux/eyevine

The same year I arrived at the University of Oxford, St Hilda's, the last single-sex college at the university, opted to admit male undergraduates for the first time. As is so often the case, the first thing that St Hilda's new men did was to seize power. The first year that the college admitted men, male candidates swept the board in elections to the junior common room, winning the roles of president, vice-president, and treasurer.

The counter-revolution was shortlived, however. In the present day, the incumbent JCR president is a woman: Oxford has, for close to a decade now, admitted more female undergraduates than male across the board. So too, as Richard V Reeves notes in *Of Boys and Men*, his new study of the pressures facing males in the schoolyard and the workplace, do the Ivy League universities in America.

Reeves' book is one of a flurry of new titles exploring what it is sometimes fashionable to call the "crisis of masculinity": one, it must be said, that is largely confined to the

west. It's a situation in which the traditional cultural touchstones of "masculinity" are under real or perceived threat, of men struggling to adjust to a world in which they are being outcompeted academically by women, and of so-called "blue collar" jobs, once largely held by men, being displaced.

Alongside *Of Boys and Men*, Ivan Jablonka's *A History of Masculinity* and Kenneth Reinicke's *Men After #MeToo* all grapple with the changing role and status of men in the 21st century. Jablonka, a French historian and writer, explores how men reached this point of "crisis" — a story he tells through an intellectual history of feminism and feminist thought. Reinicke's focus is anthropological: he uses interviews with 25 Danish men as a way to explore how men can be "allies" against sexual harassment.



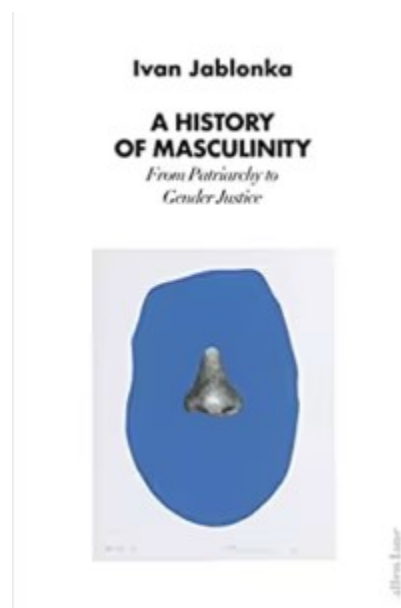
A keen-eyed observer will notice that these three authors, rather like that St Hilda's JCR, are all men. If there is a crisis of masculinity, an awful lot of men seem to be doing pretty well out of it.

But, as each of the books point out, for those men that are unskilled, undereducated, unmarried and unmoored, the problems often begin with education. Nor are those struggles confined to elite universities in the US and UK. Take Finland, whose school system is feted across much of the rest of the world. As Reeves explains, although Finnish schoolchildren rank very highly in their performances in literacy, numeracy, science and mathematics, that high performance is largely driven by girls. Twenty per cent of Finnish girls score at the highest reading levels: just nine per cent of boys do. In fact, Finnish boys do no better than American ones.

In addition, young boys have often proved what you might call "policy-resistant": it is not only Finnish school reform that has achieved stunning improvements among females but not males. Since 2005, a group of wealthy donors have paid for the

college tuition for the state school graduates in the district of Kalamazoo in Michigan. The number of women completing a college degree since 2005 went up by 45 per cent. The number of men remained static. In the UK, across every race and income bracket, girls do better than boys at school.

Malcolm X declared that “the most disrespected person in America is the black woman”: but in present-day America, African-American women are more likely than white Americans to have graduated from high school, they are also more likely than young white men to be enrolled in college, and more African-American women aged 25 to 29 have postgraduate qualifications than white men of the same age. (Both groups outperform African-American men, however.)



These will be familiar arguments and statistics to anyone who has read Hanna Rosin’s 2012 book *The End of Men*, to which Reeves’ book owes an acknowledged debt. Rosin, a journalist and writer, was optimistic not only for women but for men, who, she predicted, “will learn to expand the range of options for what it means to be a man. There’s nothing like being trounced year after year to make you reconsider your options.”

Men have continued to fall behind — but it has not had the benign effects Rosin hoped for. In the 10 years since *The End of Men* hit bookshelves, dispossessed male voters backed Brexit in the UK, Donald Trump in the US, and a collection of nativists and populists around the world. Meanwhile, the pandemic saw a greater exodus of women from the workplace than of men. And it is still women who bear the economic and financial cost of childbirth.

As Reeves notes “for most women, having a child is the economic equivalent of being hit by a meteorite. For most men, it barely makes a dent.” Rosin herself has

essentially rejected her own book, despairing recently of its “optimism”, “smugness” and “tragic naïveté”.

Men have been at the forefront of every battle, except for the battle for equality of the sexes

Jablonka’s *A History of Masculinity*

sometimes feels as if it suffers from all three shortcomings. It is an ambitious intellectual history that tries to tell the story of masculinity’s crisis through the history of feminism. But although it has a number of nice aphorisms — “men have been at the forefront of every battle, except for the battle

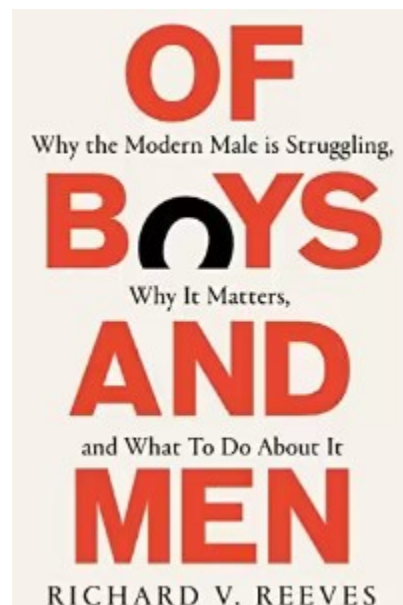
for equality of the sexes” — all too often I’m reminded of that old headline from the satirical news website *The Onion*: “Man Finally Put In Charge Of Struggling Feminist Movement”. At one point Jablonka warns of what must be done in order “to prevent feminism weakening itself with sisterly hatred”.

More importantly, it fails to really get to the heart of things. “Before being a state of mind, patriarchy is a system of choice,” Jablonka writes, which sounds all very well until you think about it. Ultimately, inequality of the sexes is not founded on a constructed idea of gender roles. It is founded on Reeves’ meteorite: childbirth. Women do all of the difficult work in terms of actually giving birth, and society has then done its level best to ensure they bear the brunt of the economic costs of rearing children, too.

Reinicke’s *Men After #MeToo* is a serious academic work whose grounding in the real lives of Danish men and whose serious academic credentials make it a more useful contribution than *A History of Masculinity*. But it is not, and is not aiming to be, a particularly readable work. It is also at times naive about the fear of men’s violence. “Men see harmless flirtation or sexual interest rather than sexual harassment because they misperceive women’s intent and responses,” Reinicke writes. Maybe some do — but others surely exert their power because, whether through physical strength or greater security in the workplace, they think they’ll get away with it. And some men fail to be allies because they, too, fear male violence and reprisal.

One reason why *Of Boys and Men* is a stronger work is that it acknowledges that, ultimately, the root of men’s advantages and disadvantages is, precisely that: physical. The story of men falling behind is, in part, about social revolutions that mean women face fewer barriers and are competing with men on more even terrain. But it is also about the physical costs and benefits of testosterone, a commodity that was more economically valuable in the 20th century, when some of the highest paid jobs

involved physical labour, than it looks to be in the 21st — where slower brain development and greater aggression prove unhelpful.



Something that Reeves misses in *Of Boys and Men*, however, is that the victory of women in education is actually the triumph of the graduate male thereafter. While fewer men might make it to the end of the higher education maze, for those that do, the economic and social status quo works pretty well. The average graduate male faces significantly less sexual competition, and in the workplace can still rely on at least some of his female colleagues being taken out of contention at crucial points in their working life by the “meteorite” of childbirth. Yes, they have something to lose from the politically disruptive activities of non-graduate men, but not as much as the average woman does.

As a result, Reeves overcooks the commonality between the men who have been “left behind” and those who continue to thrive. The subtext of Reeves’ work is: however unfashionable these concerns might be in progressive circles, if they go unaddressed, men will seek solace in the false wisdom of ultraconservatives promising to unpick the progress achieved by feminism and to “restore” men to their proper place. If non-graduates — a class that looks increasingly likely to become male-dominated — face a grim future in the workplace and outside of it, then the “crisis of masculinity” will become a crisis for all of us sooner or later.

In different ways, Jablonka and Reinicke believe that this issue can only be solved through changing what it means to be a “good” man towards being an “ally” in the feminist struggle, an opponent of sexual harassment. But the insight that Reeves half-glimpses is that really what men need in a world where more and more of them will end doing what was once dismissed as “women’s work” — whether as stay-at-home parents or in social care — is to find a respect and sense of self-esteem in that work

that was denied when it fell to women.

Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What To Do About It by Richard V Reeves, *Swift Press £20, 352 pages*

A History of Masculinity: From Patriarchy to Gender Justice by Ivan Jablonka, *Allen Lane £25, 368 pages*

Men After #MeToo: Being an Ally in the Fight Against Sexual Harassment by Kenneth Reinicke, *Palgrave Macmillan £22.99, 267 pages*

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