

# Book Reviews



**Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys. How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013.**

This is the second, “new and revised edition,” of what is now a basic book in male studies, an emerging area of scholarly research on the unique characteristics of and issues related to the experience of being a boy and a man. Originally published in 2000, *The War Against Boys* remains a revealing appraisal of the situation boys have been forced to face in recent years, above all as young students in public schools. Sommers is a philosopher by education and the mother of a young man. She speaks clearly and from experience.

On the change in the subtitle of her book—from “How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men” to “How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Boys”—Sommers explains that she “did not intend to indict the historical feminist movement,” but to avoid having “her message lost on” those who “took the book to be an attack on feminism itself,” she has changed the subtitle “to make a clearer distinction between the humane and progressive women’s movement and today’s feminist lobby” (p. 3). But given the topic of Sommers’ first book, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*, which is one of the most compelling critiques of third-wave, ideological feminism, one cannot but wonder whether her decision to modify the subtitle is not only about drawing a larger audience. Continuing her apologia for the change of emphasis from misguided feminism to misguided policies, the author asserts that the “current plight of boys and young men is, in fact, a women’s issue.” I would add: “Yes, but it is in the first place a men’s issue.” I do not believe Sommers is suggesting that it is not only a men’s issue, but I would not agree it is in the first place a women’s

issue because the boys and young men she writes about “are our sons; they are the people with whom our daughters will build a future.” So long as the ‘our’ refers to both the fathers and mothers of these boys, I am in agreement with Sommers. I would also note that, given men’s near silence to date on the “plight” of boys and young males, the voices of men need to be given a place of prominence in the discussion. No more than a male can experience what it is like to be a female—a girl, a woman, and a mother—no female can really know what it is like to be embodied in the world as a male—as a boy, a man, and a father. I would not like to believe that the author or her publisher submitted to pressure to avoid foregrounding Sommers’ questions about the place of feminism as the source of the policy changes regarding the way boys are treated that we have seen in the last few decades.

The book began as an essay published in *The Atlantic* (November 9, 1998). In the first edition, Sommers reported that, in 1997, full-time enrollment of men in college was 40%. Fifteen years later, it is about 37% according to most college admissions officials. The trend continues and it is projected that in another half-century, the last male to be awarded a bachelor’s degree will turn his tassel (p. 17). That is surely not going to happen, in part because of the work of people like Sommers. It is astonishing, however, that she is nearly alone in hammering at the ideological door that refuses to admit there are problems for boys in the early grades and for young men on university campuses. Most parents are unaware of a connection between the extraordinarily frequent diagnosis of ADHD among boys followed by the medication of their growing bodies with harmful drugs and their limping academic performance in primary school. Similarly, parents who now pay on average \$200,000 for a son’s education are unaware that college “campus life” and “residential education” deanlets and deanlings are so busied with advertising a rape culture that simply does not exist, that they pay little attention to the declining engagement of college men in campus life. The connection between pathologizing boyhood and the subsequent failure to flourish of young males is now well documented, yet educationists and policy-makers are unwilling to act to remedy the situation in most colleges and universities that now effectively promote the further decline of young males as scholars and human beings.

Sommers’ analysis focuses on the early school years and rightly so, since this is where young males spend most of their lives during the formative early, middle and late childhood years and adolescence, beginning for some with daycare as early as two and one-half years of age, on through the required years of high school a decade and a half later. What is refreshing about her account of the data—and the book is data-heavy, as it should be—is her candor in explaining why and how “women’s groups have invested so much effort in thwarting the cause of boys” (p. 25) and “our educational system may be punishing boys for the circumstance of being boys” (p. 38). This is not a maybe, however, as Sommers’ fellow philosopher, David Benatar has shown in *The Second Sexism* (see p. 199, where Sommers predicts that “boys will be tomorrow’s second sex”). It can be understood as a component of a well worked out system of social engineering. There is a conspiracy against boys and its motivation is the policies of ideological feminism, a pseudo-religion that is now anti-male in a way that the most egregious blocking or discouraging of women from entering the professions that is known to have happened until the 1970s never was. It must be noted that parity of attendance of females and males at university was reached in 1980. Now the ratio of female-male enrollments is edging towards what it was for male-female in 1960. As Sommers points out, women are now earning more graduate and professional degrees than men. Fewer men can be expected to be among the professional class as the decrease in undergraduate education continues to influence who will be our doctors, lawyers and university professors, to say nothing of those who lead in the business world and in politics.

Sommers’ concern is only with boys in this book, but her observations need to be extended

to take into consideration how the misguided education of boys in the past 40 years has played out in the lives of men now in their early middle age, a period that is now marked by a higher than average suicide rate. These men are the first generations of males who were disparaged as boys for being boys especially in school.

One of the high points of *The War Against Boys* is its deconstruction of the myth of girl weakness parlayed by Professor Carol Gilligan, a psychologist whose career ironically enough was formed by her collaboration with a male mentor, Lawrence Kohlberg, the psychologist who famously proposed stages of moral development that parallel those of psychosexual, psychosocial and cognitive development worked out by Freud, Erikson and Piaget. Gilligan is an academic who found her way to academic fame with the support of a male, but, as Sommers shows, failed to meet the minimal expectations of rigor that her mentor surely demanded of her in her “discovery” that girls’ “voices” had been silenced by a mean-spirited, man-powered patriarchy. As it turns out, there was nothing of the sort. The muting of girls’ voices was a fabrication of Professor Gilligan. Kohlberg himself comes in for examination in Sommers’ critique of “value-free kids” (“The Moral Lives of Boys”).

Another issue that occupies Sommers is a literature on the “crisis” of boyhood that was published during the same period. Only psychologists who, like ideological feminists, see boys as defective human beings (more strongly, as defective girls) could call for the medicalization of boyhood. Here we are again in the world of pseudo-illnesses that require treatment. Sommers’ more general claim is that boys are just fine until being a boy is marked as a disorder that requires remediation. In sum, Sommers writes: “An unacknowledged animus against boys is loose in our society” (p. 203). She locates where its influence is strongest: the schools. I am inclined to take a further step, which Sommers does not, and suggest that this animus is part of a broader attitude of misandry—contempt for males. This cannot be laid at the feet of the most angry ideological feminists, however. It is part of the structure of culture itself.

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