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The Bold, Independent Woman Of Today and the “Good” Men and Boys in Her Life

A Sampling of Mainstream Media Representations

PETER ALLEMANO



For decades, there has been an abundance of negative portrayals of men and boys in mainstream media, but here and there, especially in recent years, ostensibly “positive” portrayals have also been presented of exemplary men and good little boys who devote themselves to fulfilling females’ wishes and expectations. Although we cannot help but notice the “good” male’s existence (in movies, for example), we nevertheless pay little attention to him as an individual. Such representations of the “good” male do merit our attention, because upon examination, his psychological mindset is peculiar and ought to perplex us. We need to ask some hard questions about this representation. How does the “good” male image influence our attitudes toward the male sex in general? What does it teach boys about their futures, in adulthood? One unusual recent mainstream movie challenges the prevailing “good” male image and strongly suggests that there exists a far better and more realistic way to affirm the male sex’s best qualities.

American women have come a long way since the heady days of 1960s and '70s "Women's Lib." Back then, simply embracing feminist ideals held the potential to transform a woman into a folk heroine, and sometimes it could even lead to celebrity. It did for Jennifer Skolnik, whose autobiographical "Notes of a Recycled Housewife" not only got published in *New York Magazine* (May 22, 1972) but whose photo graced its cover. The image features Skolnik's four children, too, as Skolnik boldly wheels the youngest of them in a baby stroller across a busy Manhattan street. At 31 years of age, Skolnik had forced her doubts into abeyance, uprooted herself and the children from suburban Baltimore, and moved to New York in search of a "new life." Her "worn out" marriage now abandoned, she describes finding "fun" in a short-lived affair with a man who, though admittedly "all wrong" for her, brought her novelty: "There was wise-cracking and there was laughing. There was lying together and then leaping up to play the entire *Sesame Street Songbook* on the piano." To be sure, there was financial uncertainty too, but Skolnik's article ends with the happy announcement that, at long last, she has landed a job. It "may not be the Real Answer," she acknowledges, but it excites her anyway because it is "in publishing."



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Skolnik was subsequently excoriated for her actions (as were similarly-radicalized women) in Joan Didion's *The White Album* (1979). Scoffed Didion, they were "perpetual adolescents."

Nevertheless, it was trailblazers like Skolnik who, despite whatever irresponsibility or recklessness may have afflicted their actions, helped create a very different world for women today in the 2010s. Indeed, a young woman in possession of Skolnik's high ideals for living a life of "fun" (or, to use more up-to-date terminology, *fulfillment*) is far more likely to be well-equipped for pursuing it and with far less difficulty. For example, chances are better for her to be a college graduate, and she likely receives support (directly and indirectly) via billion-dollar spending on special women's programs, both government-sponsored and from the private sector. Indeed, as a feminist, the choices she makes in life can no longer be considered unusual. The word "liberation" has been dropped from everyday references to the "women's movement," and, not surprisingly, today's woman seldom even describes herself (or women's issues in general) using feminist argot at all.

There are specialists in Women's Studies (the self-designated "academic arm" of the women's movement) who acknowledge the change. Although feminism's vision for transforming society is incomplete, a wide spectrum of formerly radical sensibilities nevertheless has become accepted and internalized. Therefore, some say, it no longer is even appropriate to speak of feminism as being identical to what it was in the past. Three distinct eras are now recognized. "First Wave" feminists were those of the 19th and early 20th century. By the time Skolnik's photo was being taken for the cover of *New York Magazine*, the movement had evolved and changed. She was a "Second Wave" feminist. Today is the era of the "Third Wave" feminist.

But even the term "feminist" in any context rarely appears in mainstream media anymore, much less in connection with a numbered "wave." Instead, the current-day female is described with a variety of commonplace words. Frequently, these words get put to use in combination with one another. Some combinations appear more fre-



quently than others, however, and they also tend to appear in predictable patterns. For the sake of clarity in informal discussion, therefore, it may be helpful to dispense with the sometimes confusing, sometimes misunderstood term “feminist” altogether. This author proposes and will employ henceforward a new term, derived from mainstream media’s immediately recognizable language. We live in the era of the “Bold, Independent Woman Of Today,” or “BIWOT.”

The BIWOT is so thoroughly in “take charge” mode that she need not even pause to wonder whether or not any of her actions might detract from her abiding sense of power and control over her own destiny. It is even her prerogative to focus upon “girly” areas of interest, formerly considered dubious among some “Second Wave” feminists, such as fussing with her personal appearance to maximize its attractiveness.

Moreover, the BIWOT dictates the terms of any intimate associations with men in her life, and never the other way around. This is true whether she enters into a temporary “girlfriend/boyfriend” relationship (even the word “affair” is passé) or some other, more formal one, including marriage.

The young BIWOT can be spotted, often prettily-dressed, confidently strolling down almost any urban sidewalk. Sometimes, as in Skolnik’s life in 1972, the BIWOT wheels a baby stroller. Unlike in Skolnik’s life, however, it is also very possible that a man will be wheeling it for her, leaving her “hands free” to chat on her cell phone. The man remains silent while the BIWOT animatedly debates with another, similarly in-motion BIWOT across town any of a wide range of topics. It could be current financial affairs and their potential impact upon her decision to rent a beach house next summer, or it could be personal work issues. It could even be whether the new spritz styling sprays are more effective than the older aerosol mousses.

So if the formerly radical “Women’s Libber” has evolved to become the everyday BIWOT and increased in number so that hers is the predominant postmodern female identity, then what of the postmodern male? Have attitudes towards him changed? Has his life path, in relation to the BIWOT, also evolved?

Many “Second Wave” feminists regarded the male sex with contempt. *Ms. Magazine* editor Robin Morgan famously declared “man-hating” to be “an honorable and viable political act,” and according to Sally Miller Gearhart: “The proportion of men must be reduced to and maintained at approximately 10% of the human race.” “Second Wave” feminist sentiments usually were toned down a bit for widespread dissemination through mainstream media, but references to “male chauvinist pigs” or men as “slime” nevertheless became ubiquitous. In response to what they came to understand about the opposite sex through such disheartening characterizations, women woefully intoned: “Men just don’t get it, do they?”

But as the “Second Wave” feminist began to morph into the BIWOT, a change in attitude occurred. If a watershed moment can be identified, it arguably occurred in 2000 when feminist icon Gloria Steinem surprised the world, at age 66, by getting married. So maybe it was possible, after all, for a man to “get it.”

To be sure, negative portrayals of men and boys continued to abound in mainstream media. Over the past 40 years or so, it has been *de rigueur* for males to be portrayed as ridiculous buffoons. They mindlessly ogle cars and women, are likened to dogs (espe-

cially in beer and pizza ads), bungle every possible household task, and prove themselves hopelessly incompetent as lovers and fathers. Boys, too, get their comeuppance in mainstream media, whether depicted as ne'er-do-wells or nincompoops.

But here and there, especially in more recent years, ostensibly "positive" portrayals can also be found, exemplary men and good little boys who conform to the BIWOT's standards of behavior and rigorously devote themselves to fulfilling her wishes and expectations.

If the BIWOT's "good" male appears cowed or servile in some people's eyes, this is not to be construed by current-day standards as a "minus" for him. Indeed, mainstream media affirm and celebrate the docile male who capitulates to the BIWOT. Although we cannot help but notice his existence (in movies, for example), we nevertheless pay little attention to him as an individual. One reason is that, befitting his secondary status in relation to the BIWOT, his role is often a supporting one. If his role happens to be a primary one, it nevertheless typically remains secondary to the overall plot, upon which we focus our attention instead of upon *him*.

But mainstream media representations of the BIWOT's "good" male do merit our attention because, upon close examination, his psychological mindset is peculiar and ought to perplex us. Moreover, because mainstream media not only reflect current attitudes and beliefs but *shape* them, we need to ask some hard questions about the BIWOT's "good" male image, especially as it is represented in mainstream media. How does the image influence our attitudes toward the male sex in general? What does it teach boys about their futures in adulthood?

Indeed, one of the most unnoticed but potentially very startling of all the BIWOT's "good" male characters in mainstream movies of the early 21st century plays an absolutely crucial role in the smash hit 2001 family feature from Walt Disney Pictures, *The Princess Diaries*. At first blush, the film simply constitutes a new twist on the long-standing "coming of age" genre in which a young person matures and/or learns an important life lesson or two. The surprise for the protagonist in *The Princess Diaries*, an ostensibly ordinary American adolescent girl, is that she actually is a princess from Europe, now being called upon to fulfill her royal destiny.

The BIWOT's "good" male character in this movie is Philippe Renaldi, crown prince of a small European country called Genovia. Philippe is dead at the outset, and he actually appears on screen only once, most of his face hidden from view, in a brief flashback.

During his college days, Philippe had met and fallen in love with an American named Helen Thermopolis, who is the BIWOT *par excellence*. Her parents were Woodstock hippies, but despite the considerable differences in Philippe and Helen's respective backgrounds, they decided to get married. After the birth of their daughter, whom they named Mia, Helen changed her mind about the marriage. She disliked the royal lifestyle and announced to Philippe that she wanted Mia to have a "normal" upbringing. Whatever feelings of resentment Philippe might have felt about this unexpected turn of events he evidently kept to himself. He briefly considered abdicating the throne in order to try to save the marriage, but instead he acquiesced, not only to a divorce but also to Helen's being given sole custody of Mia. During the next 15 years, until his



untimely death in an accident, Philippe proved himself a kind-hearted father, regularly sending Mia presents. For Mia's imminent 16th birthday, Philippe wrote her a letter of congratulations. It was found in his belongings, and near the end of the movie it is given to Mia and read aloud. The boundless love that Philippe conveys through his words is nothing short of magnificent.

Even though Helen's behavior in the past bore a suspicious resemblance to that of a golddigger, Philippe has shown no signs of being bothered by it. Indeed, he has evidently proven himself financially generous to Helen in his payment of alimony and child support. Though Helen's profession is a notoriously insecure and low-paying one as a painter of abstract art, the home she shares with her daughter constitutes an entire building in San Francisco, a city where real estate prices are historically sky-high. Moreover, Mia is enrolled at a tony private high school.

Helen's BIWOT heaven, of course, hardly constitutes a "normal" American environment for a child, Helen's purported reason to have things the way they are. In addition, her heaven is marred by one troubling issue: Mia is maladjusted. Awkward to the point of being clumsy, Mia is also painfully shy and cannot get through a simple oral report in class without having to interrupt it to rush out of the room and vomit.

A thinking person might feel moved to ask a few questions about the situation. Might not the steady influence of ongoing contact with her father, especially considering what a paragon of goodness he was, have prevented Mia's problems from developing in the first place? Indeed, even if there *were* potential "minuses" in the prospect of growing up in the royal palace of Genovia, might not they have been outweighed or at least balanced by the "pluses"? For example, because the possibility existed that Mia herself would assume the throne one day, would it not have been in her best interests to learn from firsthand exposure at her father's side what skills in diplomacy and governance would be required of her?

If Helen really cared about her daughter and not just about her own personal *fulfillment* (which includes, strangely, dating one of Mia's teachers) one cannot help but wonder why none of these questions ever occurred to *her*. Especially considering that Helen's artistry manifests itself some of the time in throwing darts at balloons filled with paint, one might also wonder: Is this BIWOT nothing but a revved-up, postmodern version of one of Joan Didion's "perpetual adolescents"?

But the BIWOT is a culture heroine, and the people who created *The Princess Diaries* seek to entertain and amuse audiences, not involve us in questioning the prevailing gender paradigm that it affirms. So not only has the BIWOT's "good" man, Philippe, acted in ways that are contrary to human nature which include indulging the BIWOT's most unreasonable demands and expectations with alacrity, but he has died an early death without it apparently being of any consequence to anyone except Mia. Though she has never met her father, she does express fleeting sorrow, once, to a friend. But not even Philippe's own mother seems upset. Though she speaks of him in glowing terms, it is more his attitude of devotion to his country that she admires than anything else about him, and her primary concern is for *replacing* him, hopefully with Mia.

If there existed a terrible personal flaw in Philippe that renders him unworthy of being mourned after his death, it remains a mystery. He is a bizarre character indeed.

But he is a “positive” depiction of the male in mainstream media. He scrupulously does everything he is supposed to do, and then, when he becomes unwanted, he obligingly disappears.

Unlike Helen in *The Princess Diaries*, the leading BIWOT character in other mainstream movies does not necessarily have any desire to be rid of the “good” man in her life. To the contrary, many recent movies are about the BIWOT *getting* and *keeping* the man of her dreams. Still, upon examination, the BIWOT’s “good” man in these movies can be just as strange and baffling a character as Philippe.

One such character appears in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, another blockbuster released in 2001. Like *The Princess Diaries*, it conforms in many respects to a well-established genre. In this case, it is the tale of an undesirable woman who winds up making good with a suave, well-to-do gentleman. Numerous precedents exist. With *Sabrina* (1954) and *My Fair Lady* (1964), Audrey Hepburn established a permanent position of prominence for herself in cinematic history by portraying such Cinderella-like characters who overcome their respective shortcomings with spectacularly life-altering results. *North By Northwest* (1959) represents one variation of the genre. At the beginning of the movie, Eva Marie Saint’s character is already sophisticated, lovely, well-spoken and *ostensibly* desirable. But her personal background and present circumstances are burdened with deeply troubling aspects. By the end of the movie, however, she has surmounted them and married an upstanding businessman who is not only gorgeous but also financially secure enough to reside in a landmark Long Island mansion.

The genre provides a tantalizing fantasy for female audiences to contemplate. But there is a significant difference between the older movies and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. In the older movies, the undesirable woman undergoes a transformation that enables her to win her permanent position at the man’s side. Put another way, she develops the necessary attributes that finally render her qualified to be in a relationship with him.

Of course, the average female moviegoer of the past was very unlikely, under any circumstances, ever to find herself in the arms of a Humphrey Bogart, Rex (“Sexy Remy”) Harrison, or Carey Grant. For one thing, in the humdrum world at large, charismatic male movie stars were in short supply. Moreover, real-life counterparts to the scintillating characters they portrayed simply did not exist. The devastating female characters of the older movies were also unreal. Not only were they the rehearsed work product of unusually beautiful actresses, but they were *also* the co-creation of a multitude of professional cinematographic technicians, designers, stylists, writers and performance coaches.

Nevertheless, it could be very enjoyable to imagine how things *might* turn out for the ordinary woman if she too somehow could become not only svelte and elegant but also smart enough to dazzle a worldly man in dialogue with her impeccable repartee. To be sure, the storyline of the genre was merely a fantasy, never manifesting itself in real life with such stark simplicity. But embedded within in the fantasy of the older movies there nevertheless exists an honest acknowledgment of a fundamental reality about the nature of adult human relationships. They are *transactional*, and each individual is expected to bring something of comparable value to the table in exchange for what the other person brings. Indeed, if the female moviegoer in the days of yore



had not already “settled” for a man far less glamorous than her favorite matinee idol and the Dapper Dans he portrayed, she had few delusions that an ordinary mate of significantly lower status would probably be her eventual fate.

Bridget Jones’s Diary departs from the genre insofar as the titular character, a 30-year-old undesirable BIWOT, *does not change but gets the glamorous, high-status man anyway*. Bridget lives in one of the world’s greatest cities, London, but none of its beauty or myriad attractions seem to be able to engage her attention or interest. When we are not seeing her at work or in a bar with a small group of cynical drinking buddies, we find her (more often than not) home alone. Apparently she has no hobbies. She watches television, and even when she makes entries in her diary, she takes no joy in the writing process. The entries are usually terse and perfunctory. She describes the faults of her family and co-workers but never so much as acknowledges in passing the existence of laudable qualities in any of them. Consequently, Bridget is often sullen. Her conversational style is prone to fumbling and is punctuated repeatedly with strong pursings of the lips in disapproval of what others have said. To be sure, Bridget comes from an educated background, so she does not shout and scream like, say, the irascible “guttersnipe” Eliza in *My Fair Lady*. It is through mainly understated means that Bridget conveys the fact that she is a very unpleasant person.

Bridget represents one popular and much admired version of the BIWOT: the post-modern woman who is “irreverent” and “dizzy” (screenplay author Helen Fielding’s words describing the character). If she is cheeky, it is forgivable, even likable, because of her daring to defy “demure” female stereotypes. Indeed, this feisty, sometimes even brash type of BIWOT was honored with the very name of a popular magazine for teenage girls from 1988 until 1996: *Sassy*. But in Bridget’s case, insouciance in the face of normative behavior exceeds a level where it might be called charming. Bridget is *obnoxious*, as when, for example, she refers cavalierly to a male homosexual friend using derogatory language: “a total poof.” Making fun of a loyal and supportive friend behind his back with an insulting epithet is not daring and cute. It is mean and reprehensible.

Making Bridget even more repellent is the fact that she is overweight, dowdy, clumsy, slovenly and sloppy. She cares naught about her physical health. As one potential love interest observes (and Bridget herself acknowledges), she “smokes like a chimney” and “drinks like a fish.”

Bridget exhibits no compensatory attractive character traits in the way she manages her life. In the domestic arts, she is helplessly incompetent. Her apartment is a filthy mess, and the one time she cooks a meal, it proves to be an inedible disaster. At work, Bridget is also incompetent whether on the job in the publicity department of a book publisher, or later, as a television journalist. Near the end of the movie, however, a potential love interest goes out of his way to help her shine on camera and grants her an exclusive, newsworthy interview.

At the outset of the movie, Bridget’s history of “romantic attachments,” understandably, has been with equally undesirable men. The list she writes in her diary consists of “alcoholics, workaholics, commitmentphobics, peeping-toms, megalomaniacs, emotional fuckwits [and] perverts.” Over the course of the movie, however, an amazing

thing happens. Bridget becomes the object of amorous interest of not one but *two* dashing handsome, articulate, financially successful men. At the climax of the movie, the two of them duke it out, literally, Old-West-style for Bridget.

Despite his assets, one of the men, Daniel Cleaver, is not a very “good” man by BIWOT standards. He is a womanizer, and during the course of his relationship with Bridget, it is revealed that he has simultaneously been seeing another woman, named Lara. She comes across as a postmodern fantasy female dreamed up by the editors of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, leggy and beautiful enough to have been a Milan fashion model but instead a highly accomplished businesswoman who jets between New York and London for her job. Daniel nevertheless comes to feel that Bridget is the only woman for him, and after Lara leaves him, he asks Bridget to take him back. But she is “looking for something more extraordinary.”

She finds it, too, in the other man, Mark Darcy, the very one who made the unflattering remarks about her smoking and drinking at the beginning of the movie. Though Bridget has reasons to doubt it initially, Mark turns out after all to be about as good as the BIWOT’s “good” man possibly *can* be. It is one year since the beginning of the film as the two of them finally enter into a romantic relationship. During the intervening time, Bridget has put herself through some efforts at self-improvement. But she ultimately has failed in the effort and is exactly the way she was at the outset. She may even be worse, because she evidently now consumes even more alcohol than ever, to the point of binge drinking. But Mark states that, despite Bridget’s flaws, he likes her just the way she is.

The sentiment, on its face, is very lovely. But considering *whom* Mark addresses when he makes his feelings known, the thinking person might feel prompted to ask: “For heaven’s sake, *why?*”

The psychological make-up of the BIWOT’s “good” man again makes no sense. He brings so much to the table, and by contrast what she brings might as well be nothing. Mark is so extraordinary that, to try to sum him up, one is tempted to quote the magic tape that measured the eponymous nanny character in *Mary Poppins*: “PRACTICALLY PERFECT IN EVERY WAY.” Indeed, as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* ends and Bridget’s new relationship with Mark begins, it comes across very much as something involving a little girl inside an adult female’s body who will henceforth be taken care of by a male nanny. For a childish woman like Bridget, perhaps, the desirability of the relationship is understandable. For a demonstrably intelligent man like Mark, it is not.

Mark’s wish to be with Bridget seems even more senseless in light of the fact that never during the course of the movie (an entire year’s in-depth examination of her life) does she express gratitude for anything. Only once, at the end of a speech she gives at work, does she even use the phrase “thank you.” Even then her words are spoken mechanically. So if past behavior is any predictor of behavior in the future, then all of Mark’s gifts to Bridget whether spiritual or material are likely to be taken for granted.

Indeed, upon examination, Mark’s bewildering interest in Bridget seems to suggest that he is not motivated by the dynamics of the human heart at all. Strangely, when viewed objectively, it almost seems that he is entering into a relationship with her be-



cause it conforms to some type of “ideal” mandated by a Marxist authority which he feels inexplicably bound to obey: *from him* there must occur a flow, according to what he can supply; *to her* must come all of what he possesses, according to whatever she needs and wants.

Alternatively, one can only assume that Mark must be some manifestation of the *traditional* male who, in the face of torturous difficulty, is willing to “take it like a man.” Instead of, say, pushing himself to the very limits of physical and psychological endurance in a dangerous job, perhaps Mark has found a new way to test his manly abilities to survive by deliberately exposing himself to the hazards of a relationship with someone selfish who will only take advantage of him. Either way, Mark, the BIWOT’s “good” man in every way, is preposterous.

The BIWOT’s “good” man in *Tadpole* (2002), a Columbia University history professor named Stanley Grubman, is beyond preposterous. He is absurd. Stanley is so “good” to the primary BIWOT character that, paradoxically, he becomes guilty of perpetrating deep, possibly irreversible, harm upon his own 15-year-old son, Oscar. No one in the movie seems to notice or care, however, because judging from the overall tone of the movie, it is after all the cherished BIWOT’s values and wishes that Stanley supports with his neglectful parenting. So Stanley’s priorities, strange as they may seem from an objective perspective, actually are proper in the social world depicted in *Tadpole*, which is situated in a largely upper middle-class, progressive Manhattan neighborhood called the Upper West Side. It may be worth noting that this is the very place that many influential movers and shakers in mainstream media call home.

Tadpole was an independently produced, low-cost feature, a genre that allows for a little more daring than movies created with multi-million-dollar budgets. But it nevertheless had enough mainstream appeal to be picked up for worldwide distribution by a mainstream company (Miramax) after its exhibition at the Sundance Film Festival. *Tadpole* proved to be both a critical and financial success.

Tadpole bills itself as a “romantic comedy,” but for the thinking person the characterization begs two nettling questions: (1) Since when is statutory rape “romantic”? and (2) Since when does deliberate post-rape manipulation and humiliation of the victim constitute “comedy” and not a cruel compounding of the victim’s emotional and psychological trauma?

Oscar, the young rape victim in *Tadpole*, has a patina of sophistication. He reads Voltaire and speaks French fluently. The adults in his life, rather stupidly, choose to interpret this as a sign that he is precocious and far more mature than his 15 years would suggest. They do not pause to wonder whether, perhaps, this charming lad is simply manifesting his own personal version of garden-variety adolescent fascination with special areas of interest. In another boy, for example, the identical propensity might manifest itself in an ability to recite detailed trivia about professional basketball. Indeed, the audience quickly discovers, Oscar is *very much* an adolescent, going through the commonplace throes of puppy love. During this transitional phase of lie, there is also often a tendency to become amorously drawn to totally inappropriate people, and Oscar manifests this teenage trait, too. He has fallen passionately in love with his stepmother, Eve. Fortunately, for the young person suffering through such infatu-

ation, the crush is typically short-lived, and, sure enough, by the end of the movie just a few days later, Oscar's extravagant feelings of attraction to the woman have evaporated.

Tadpole chronicles how, midst the crush, an unmarried BIWOT named Diane Lodder (who is Eve's best friend) exploits Oscar's vulnerability. Oscar evinces no attraction for the woman at all, but she nevertheless maneuvers him into circumstances where she can take advantage of him for her own sexual gratification.

At the beginning of the movie, Diane flirts overtly with Oscar at a Thanksgiving party hosted by his father and stepmother. Late that night when Oscar is drunk, she seduces him. At the time, Oscar is so high on alcohol that he can barely even see what is in front of his own eyes, and indeed his reason for going through with having sex with Diane is that he mistakes her for Eve. Diane, on the other hand, is completely sober and in a position of power either to proceed with the sexual encounter or to stop it before it develops beyond the initial kiss. So not only is Diane guilty of statutory rape, but she has perpetrated a peculiar form of "date rape" too.

The next morning, Oscar is aghast, embarrassed and deeply ashamed of himself. He begs Diane never to say anything about the incident to anyone. Diane's feelings, however, are very different. She appears amused by what has happened, and she exudes an aura of coy pride in her conquest. The reasons for her attitude are unclear. As gender studies professor Nick Davis puts it in his blog: "The film has trouble deciding, and ultimately elects not to, whether Oscar's precocity is really so impressive to a 40-year-old woman, or if Diane will simply sleep with anything that walks."

At any rate, Diane smiles and promises to keep Oscar's secret. But in her mind Oscar's feelings, as well as the agreement into which she has entered, count for nothing. She wastes no time in telling three of her female friends about her adventure that very afternoon over tea. Oscar walks into the restaurant while the gossiping women are at the height of their prurient enjoyment of Diane's titillating tale. Understandably, Oscar is horrified, but the women cheerfully manipulate him into joining the party, where they proceed to flirt with him. Oscar's alarm is temporarily dispelled by the unusual experience of becoming the center of so much womanly attention. He is even able to relax for a while and enjoy the party because he is naïve enough to believe that he sincerely interests the women. Actually, as any observant viewer could have told him, they are merely toying with his feelings and making ironic fun of him.

But Oscar's alarm returns full force when Diane informs him that she will be joining him and his parents for dinner that night in an elegant French restaurant. At the outset of dinner, Oscar is on tenterhooks because he fears that Diane will reveal his secret. Over the course of dinner, Diane taunts Oscar with progressively more sadistic hints that she is going to spill the beans. Eventually, she does so by assaulting him with a passionate kiss on the lips during a moment when the two of them have excused themselves from the table. Oscar struggles frantically to extricate himself from her grasp, but the incident occurs plainly in his father's sightlines. Stanley is surprised, but curiously not particularly bothered by Diane's solecistic impropriety, and he refers to it simply as "something very unusual."

Upon returning to the table, Diane remarks: "Oh, what the hell, we're all adults here."



Oscar protests: “No, actually we’re not!” Diane then proceeds to tell Eve that Oscar and she “are lovers.” Her wording suggests an ongoing affair, and it stuns Oscar. Eve is perturbed and points out that Oscar is a minor. But she does not seem to feel that any corrective action need be taken at this juncture. Stanley’s reaction is even odder than Eve’s. Oscar’s behavior appalls him more than that of his son’s rapist. Because Stanley erroneously believes that Oscar has a girlfriend his own age (on the premises at the moment, no less), he is worried about *her* feelings, because it is possible that she too has witnessed the kiss.

If Eve’s lack of indignation toward Diane is morally inexcusable, at least to some degree it is explainable. Eve is biologically unrelated to Oscar and has apparently not known him for very long. She grew up with Diane, and the two are longtime comrades in BIWOTship. So it is understandable for her to feel a stronger alliance with her predator friend than with Oscar when it comes to the handling of a prickly situation.

Stanley’s behavior is more difficult to explain. Although he is aware of such inter-generational relationships’ acceptability in other cultures and remarks in passing on one example, he ignores the reality of the present moment. His son is in deep psychic pain. Why does Stanley not get up from the table and call the police? Alternatively, if he prefers not to send his wife’s best friend to the nearest precinct station for booking, why at the very least does he not end his own friendship with her on the spot? Indeed, he does not even tell his son’s rapist to pay for her own dinner. What gives?

A possible explanation lies in the widespread popularity of one feminist theory about the historic character of the relationship between the sexes. In a nutshell, the theory states, women as a group, compared to men as a group, have been oppressed, downtrodden and forced against their will to live in a state of deprivation. Moreover, the theory goes, men as a group are entirely responsible for female suffering. “Women’s Lib,” for many “Second Wave” feminists, was largely about “payback.” Because social structures were infused with intractable anti-female malevolence, the thinking went, no “enlightened” woman should have any scruples about doing whatever she wanted and whatever it took to advance her interests. Indeed, it was her moral and political obligation to act accordingly — to become a BIWOT.

The historical record ought to have opened the theory to serious doubt in the minds of thinking people the very minute the theory began to receive widespread attention. But its exquisite simplicity had dazzling appeal. Quickly and easily, it was now possible to determine how anyone should be regarded and treated based on gender alone and not upon individual comportment. In addition, the theory had enormous emotional resonance for women who gloried in feelings of righteous indignation. It stirred them to action. For better or worse, the theory was also attractive for many men who felt both chivalrous toward women and eager to compete against other men in proving themselves “exceptions to the rule” regarding their sex. As “Second Wave” feminism faded and “Third Wave” feminism emerged, the shrillness of the rhetoric with which the theory was articulated became much less pronounced, but its basic sentiments survived unchanged. So, Stanley may simply be a male feminist, politely manifesting his support for the theory. He may be so devoted to social justice, feminist-style, that he is even willing to make a heartfelt sacrifice for the cause: his own son’s dignity as

well as his son's physical, psychological and spiritual well-being.

For Stanley, in other words, it may be that the BIWOT's capacity for wrongdoing is non-existent. Indeed, if one regards Oscar's angst from a "big picture" perspective inspired by the theory, then despite all evidence to the contrary, Oscar cannot possibly have been harmed by Diane's actions at all. Alternatively, if it has to be conceded that he *was* harmed, then, as a member of the oppressor sex, he must have deserved what he got. Therefore, it would be uncouth of Stanley to stick up for his son.

Another possible explanation for Stanley's behavior and his unwillingness to ensure that Oscar's distress receive both logistical and psychic remediation is the possibility that he fears retaliation from Diane. So much as questioning a BIWOT's behavior, much less subjecting it to critical scrutiny, carries with it the unavoidable risk of being called a misogynist. It can be very painful for a man to be accused of wanting (as a BIWOT might put it) to "turn back the clock" and force women into living barefoot, pregnant and chained to a stove.

Stanley is also vulnerable to a second defensive accusation frequently thrown in the face of men by BIWOTs when they feel they are being judged unfairly: the man *fears* a powerful woman, which means he lacks character and therefore ought to be ashamed of himself.

But in Diane, there *is* much for Stanley to fear. She has proven herself dangerously aggressive, disrespectful, cruel and untrustworthy. Being told that he should feel ashamed of his natural, organic response to her willfully atrocious conduct would likewise be painful.

Interestingly, the only thing that changes in Stanley's attitude as a result of being witness to Oscar's misadventure with Diane is his attitude toward Eve. He should "listen" to her more carefully in the future.

If the BIWOTs' "good" men in *The Princess Diaries* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* are bizarre and strange, then the "good" man in *Tadpole* is downright weird. Being exposed to abusive behavior by a BIWOT does nothing to upset Stanley but, instead, fosters within him a desire to become an even better man.

The movie ends on a happy note insofar as Oscar (for the moment) is unperturbed. Implied is that he will move forward with his life and develop healthy relationships with the opposite sex. No mention is made of the sexual assault victim's propensity to experience intermittent flashbacks that are very painful, especially if the trauma is left unaddressed. The development of post-traumatic stress disorder is not out of the question. Who knows? Oscar's wound may fester, and in defense against future hurt he may develop an impenetrable shell. Consequently, this tender-hearted boy may have been completely changed by Diane's behavior as well as by his own father's neglectful response to her criminal action. We should not be surprised if he were to grow up and become a man who qualifies for Bridget Jones's list of undesirables: "alcoholics, workaholics, commitmentphobics, peeping-toms, megalomaniacs, emotional fuckwits [and] perverts."

Ironically, in this case, Stanley's being a "good" man to a BIWOT by indulging her in the BIWOT's restless search for *fulfillment* may wind up generating unhappy experiences for other BIWOTs in the future, in their own relationships with Oscar. Time



alone will tell what happens to Oscar. Essentially, his sexual exploitation by a treacherous family friend and the neglectful response of a primary caretaker have been like a nuclear bomb detonating in the boy's life. After the initial shock, there occurs a moment of calm, at which point the movie ends. But the radiation will soon begin its inevitable outward spread and will wreak heaven-only-knows-what havoc. Presumably, audiences just are not supposed to think about that. Instead, we are supposed to exit the cinema or turn off our DVD players, chuckling gleefully at the destruction of an innocent youngster's life for the sake of indulging a BIWOT in her passing whim.

The popular acceptance of the presuppositions of the three movies discussed above as well as many other movies that express comparable values may move a thinking person to wonder how BIWOTs become so sure of their entitlement to get whatever they want out of the opposite sex. The answer is simple. They are brought up to believe in their own abiding superiority and, consequently, the presumption that the opposite sex exists for the purpose of fulfilling females' wishes. Finding a "good" male for the BIWOT, or in the alternative, converting a problematic male into a "good" male is even the subject of some children's books. In one telling example, the process of fixing the problematic male is a divinely enacted one.

Ex-cabaret singer Marianne Williamson is a "New Thought" minister and bestselling author who claims to be performing her work at the behest of no less a spiritual authority than Jesus Christ himself. Thousands flock to attend her seminars. Though Williamson is not a household name like, say, Oprah Winfrey, she has appeared as a guest, numerous times, on television shows hosted by Winfrey and other celebrities. More important, among people in positions to create television programs and content for other forms of mainstream media, Williamson is a well-known personality and has many followers who take her teachings seriously. Therefore, Williamson's influence upon our culture cannot be underestimated, whether we are examining the attitudes we see and hear about gender issues in mainstream media or we are contemplating the degree to which our own personal beliefs have been informed by those attitudes.

Williamson's perspective is revealed in a short picture book that she characterizes as "a support for parents as well as children" in "the revolution of faith." *Emma & Mommy Talk to God* was published in 1996, and in case there might be any doubt in readers' minds that the titular characters represent Williamson and her own illegitimate daughter, Emma, the two of them, featured in a photograph on the back cover of the book, look very much like the characters depicted in the book's colorful illustrations. Clearly, we are expected to regard them as role models to emulate within our own families. Moreover, the exquisitely beautiful pictures depict an idealized world, strongly suggesting that by espousing the wisdom proffered by Williamson "the revolution of faith" will transform our own world into something similarly lovely.

Other characters in the book include eight angels, of which seven are female and one is male. The disparity between the sexes is unexplained, so presumably there simply exists greater spirituality in the female sex than in the male sex, leading naturally to the existence of more female angels than male angels. Alternatively, perhaps, God has perceived wisdom in feminism-inspired affirmative action programs on earth and decided to enact an affirmative action program in heaven, too, whereby female souls are

given preferential admission over male souls.

In contrast to the 7-to-1 female/male ratio found in the heavenly realms, when it comes to depicting the earthly realm of the family, Williamson presents to “parents and children” a social unit that contains no males at all. There is not even an oblique reference to a one-time father. When Emma asks Mommy, “Where do I come from?”, Mommy tells Emma that she comes “[f]rom God.” Mommy’s complete explanation is as follows: “God loves you very much, and he loves Mommy, too, so he sent you to Mommy so we could be together.” The accompanying illustration depicts a smiling baby, floating downward through the sky.

Of course, overt explanations of what British humorist E. F. Benson referred to as “that horrid thing which Freud calls sex” have long been avoided in stories for children. But at least when a stork flew through the sky carrying a baby in popular folklore, it was typically for delivery to a mother *and* a father or to a family, not just to a woman. If we are to take Williamson on her word that this book is intended “for parents,” then the implication is that we are also to understand there is really only one type of person who qualifies to be called a parent, and she is female. Indeed, the father of Williamson’s own daughter is someone whom Williamson refuses to identify or discuss.

The parent-child relationship in *Emma & Mommy Talk to God* is reminiscent of the same type of relationship in feminist author Charlotte Perkins Gillman’s 1915 novel *Herland*. Gilman depicts a utopian society where contented women, isolated from the polluting presence of the male sex, have spontaneously developed the capacity to become pregnant and have babies through parthenogenesis. In *Emma & Mommy Talk to God*, the absence of even a fleeting reference to the existence of a father for Emma strongly suggests an approving nod in the direction of *Herland*.

The main difference between the worlds of *Herland* and *Emma & Mommy Talk to God* is that the latter does have a high regard for the male. To be sure, no place for him exists within the exemplary family structure, but according to Mommy, he is nevertheless *loved* by God. Moreover, if he is a “good” male by BIWOT standards, as those standards are expressed in Williamson’s book, this means he is *useful* to the female.

In Williamson’s world, however, not all males are “good,” and it turns out that Emma knows a little boy at school named Peter who has been “mean” to her. Mommy explains the reason: “Peter is very sad and scared.” The accompanying portrait of Peter is the sole illustration that does not depict an identifiable location. Peter gazes dolefully at the viewer and weakly clasps his hands. His torso, at an angle for no discernable reason except, perhaps, to suggest that he is off-kilter, is dressed in muted colors and the background is a somber grayish blue.

Mommy tells Emma to pray for Peter “and ask God to make him happy.” Emma obeys Mommy and achieves stunning overnight results: “The very next day, Emma dropped her sweater. Peter picked it up nicely and gave it back to her. Emma knew in her heart that God had helped Peter.” When Emma reports the incident to Mommy, she is told: “I’m proud of you, Emma. You did the right thing. You’re a wonderful little girl. I love you.” Now a “good” boy to the little BIWOT-in-training, Peter has become her servant. And for exercising her spiritual power over Peter, Emma is rewarded with Mommy’s



love.

When a girl is brought up to believe she has power over the opposite sex and not only a right to exercise it freely but to expect that doing so will make the male happy *and* accrue tangible benefits for herself, how can she possibly become anything other than a BIWOT in adulthood? The added incentive of being given love from her mother in exchange for her flowering in this way makes shoe-horning herself into the BIWOT mold all but completely irresistible.

Once a female has become a BIWOT, she is very unlikely ever to want to modify her exalted self-regard or her *modus operandi*. Moreover, because the BIWOT identity receives all but universal endorsement from society at large, stepping back from it would constitute, paradoxically, a bold act of rebellion against the status quo. The repercussions of disapproval would be severe.

As a society, we are *enamored* with the feminist theory, explained above, out of which the BIWOT identity evolved. Indeed, regardless of how silly the theory may seem upon rigorous objective scrutiny, it nevertheless contains a kernel of truth. Throughout history, there clearly *have* been potent “minuses” in the female experience of life. Focusing upon them, ignoring the corresponding “minuses” in the male experience of life, and cherry-picking historical facts in support of the notion of male oppression imparts a compelling impression of plausibility to the theory. Where empirical evidence does not exist to support any given aspect of the theory, it can easily be invented through “advocacy” research methodology that deliberately seeks to prove pre-determined conclusions. If intellectual dishonesty is involved, it hardly matters. Further buttressing researchers’ ability to support the credibility of the theory are currently fashionable fact-finding cognitive processes that are subjective, “non-linear” or “intuitive.” In *Emma & Mommy Talk to God* — a purportedly didactic book, it bears repeating — one so-called “way of knowing” is presented as perfectly acceptable for getting a grip on reality. Emma “knew in her heart” that the change in little Peter’s behavior occurred as a direct result of something *she* had done.

Whatever evidence exists to suggest that the feminist theory of male oppression might be nothing but sophistry cannot compete in the current climate of popular ideas because, frankly, hardly anybody pays any attention to the evidence. So even if the BIWOT herself has doubts about her spiritual superiority and her entitlement to get whatever she wants in life, they tend to get brushed aside by society’s overwhelming eagerness to embrace her as a magnificent breakthrough for humanity, manifesting the most socially significant form of personal identity in recorded history.

Besides, the BIWOT typically possesses a finely tuned personal sensitivity that society has become committed to protect. An acknowledgment that the BIWOT identity in some respects, perhaps, might be a tad pretentious or faddish would feel embarrassing for the BIWOT. It could even have the unpleasant consequence of forcing her dangerously close to admitting she is nothing but another one of Joan Didion’s “perpetual adolescents.”

But some observers have noticed that not all men and boys have responded very well to the now-pervasive BIWOT identity for women. One observer is Kay S. Hymowitz. In her 2011 book *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys*, she

describes males suffering significant difficulties nowadays. Despite the book's flippant subtitle, not a few of those difficulties, she acknowledges in all seriousness, are due to unfair treatment arising out of the popularization of feminism itself. So, what is to be done? Hymowitz's prescription makes no sense. Men need to "man up." As she describes what she means by the expression, they need to become the BIWOT's "good" man. But, as discussed above, thankless servitude and self-obliteration, however *useful* in a man to the BIWOT, simply do not square with human nature. In addition, any sincere attempt to fulfill the role of the BIWOT's "good" man requires self-loathing. Self-loathing can lead to catastrophe.

In an article called "The Leap," published in *New York Magazine* (May 30, 2010), reporter Jesse Green describes the suicide of 17-year-old Teddy Graubard, who had jumped from an 11th-floor window at the prestigious Dalton School on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The article asks: "How did a generally happy and inarguably brilliant eleventh-grader, who would likely have achieved honors at next week's graduation, had he lived, come to believe his world was over?"

Teddy had been caught cheating on a Latin exam, and after pondering a range of possible explanations, the article concludes: "He jumped because his foolish solution to a passing academic problem reacted with the peculiar ideational rigidity of his condition ['a mild form of Asperger's syndrome'] and, who knows, perhaps with the suicidality that is a potential side effect of most psychotropic medications."

Considering Teddy's family background, however, one cannot help but consider the possibility of at least one additional contributing factor. The article also describes Teddy's mother, Carla, an extraordinary BIWOT who characterizes herself as "very aggressive and very successful and very career-oriented." Teddy was the result of an *in vitro* fertilization and grew up without a father. For Carla, the article explains, there just was not a man good enough to be her husband. Why? Her friend and colleague, Ava Seave, explains: "You have to understand who we women are. . . . We're really efficient. We kick ass and take names. We're not nice. It's not easy for this sort of woman."

Indeed. If "this sort of woman" is going to be in relationship with a man, it will not be "easy" for him either. To meet all her needs and expectations, he had better be some sort of magical combination of Hercules and Santa Claus with a bit of the Marquis de Sade thrown in, too, so that no matter what she dishes out for him, he can "take it like a man."

No such magical combination exists, of course, and Carla's uncompromising perspective led her to "go it alone," the article explains. Sadly for Teddy, he could not live up to Carla's expectations about male flawlessness either. He was *not* Mark Darcy in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Motherhood, the article makes clear, was the ultimate source of *fulfillment* in Carla's mind. Teddy had tainted her dream with an act about which she would undoubtedly feel disappointment and distress.

So whether Teddy consciously intended to or not, he did what *any* "good" man of the BIWOT would do when he has proved his unworthiness. He removed himself from the scene so the BIWOT would not be troubled by him anymore. However, Teddy was very unlike the BIWOT's "good" male role model Philippe Renaldi in *The Princess Diaries*, who also needed to do the gentlemanly thing and disappear from a BIWOT's



life. Teddy did not have the wherewithal to buy his mother a building in San Francisco, where she might pursue *fulfillment* by throwing darts at paint-filled balloons instead of having to continue grappling with the unpleasant vicissitudes of her relationship with him.

But Teddy *did* fulfill a popular female fantasy with his grisly solution to his problem. Therefore, if we are to be unfailingly supportive of the BIWOT, like Stanley Grubman in *Tadpole* (and the popularity of the movie suggests that many people believe we should), then, chilling as the idea may seem when we first consider it, perhaps we should not mourn Teddy's passing at all. Instead, maybe, we should pat him on the back, metaphorically, albeit posthumously, for his thoughtfulness.

This fantasy of a man willing to die for a woman is, perhaps, most poignantly expressed in a popular Broadway show tune from *Camelot*, called "The Simple Joys of Maidenhood." Protofeminist Princess Guenevere, being forced at a young age into marriage with a man she has never met, complains about being deprived of the pleasure of male death in her personal life:

"Where's the knight pining so for me
He leaps to death in woe for me?
Oh, where are a maiden's simple joys?"

So, in a sense, Carla Graubard succeeded in her life where Princess Guinevere did not. Carla avoided marriage *and* had a wonderful young man die for her. When viewed from a larger perspective, Teddy's suicide can even be considered a praiseworthy act that indirectly benefits women in general — if not all women, then at least feminist theorists like Sally Miller Gearhart who advocate in favor of decreasing the male population. For that highly idealistic group of BIWOTs, Teddy's death might even be a *happy* event because of its being a step toward the opening up of more *Lebensraum* for women.

But "The Leap" describes Carla as feeling unhappy. Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that more than a few BIWOTs are feeling unhappy. According to the United States General Social Survey, women's overall level of happiness declined steadily during the period 1972-2006, the very timeframe during which the BIWOT emerged into widespread prominence. In 2009, two professors at The Wharton School, Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, further documented the decline in a paper they called "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness." But just as it is the BIWOT's prerogative to set boundless expectations for her life and the people close to her, it is also her prerogative to complain when her impossibly high standards are unmet.

Especially when an unhappy BIWOT is of the type who, like Carla Graubard, is "not nice," then any men and boys in her life of necessity are walking on eggshells. They *know*, if only unconsciously, that they are incapable of living up to the "good" male standards being presented in mainstream media.

The people who created *I Love You, Man*, a popular mainstream movie released theatrically in 2009, seem to sense that the time has come, at long last, to challenge the concept of the BIWOT's "good" man.

I Love You, Man is a sophomoric comedy, and audience members laugh (or not) in response to whatever degree they find enjoyment in this silly genre, with its contrived plot devices, over-the-top visual gags, characters' idiosyncrasies and occasional vulgarity. But, intentionally or not, the filmmakers in this instance have also incorporated biting social commentary and a political statement about gender issues. So, for viewers attentive enough to notice, lurking in the comedy's requisite happy ending lie undertones that not only raise sobering questions but suggest a strong potential for darkness in the characters' future lives.

The social world of the movie is the chic, moneyed, postmodern elite of Los Angeles. Zooley Rice is a pretty, exuberant young BIWOT and, in partnership with her two best female friends, runs a creative business. Its exact nature is never revealed, but based on the way it looks, it appears to be an interior design studio. At the beginning of the movie, Zooley has been dating a handsome, successful real estate agent named Peter Klaven for a few months, and she has also taken up residence in his spacious, beautifully furnished house.

Much later in the movie, it is revealed in passing that there were a couple of troubling issues in her past. Her father has long been absent from her life, and her last boyfriend became so repulsed by her that, by the end of their relationship, he did not even want her to touch him. Though Peter knows these things, he nevertheless has fallen in love with Zooley and proposes marriage. Immediately after accepting his proposal, Zooley quickly calls her girlfriends to announce the good news, just as if she were letting them know about the acquisition of a new handbag with which to accessorize an outfit. Her cavalier disregard for the sanctity of their relationship visibly hurts Peter as she dishes about even its most private aspects. But he remains silent. Like most chic, moneyed, postmodern, urban elite men, it does not even occur to Peter to protest. Unconsciously or not, he obediently and unquestioningly accepts his proper place in relationship with a BIWOT — under her thumb.

Treating men like dirt is a taken-for-granted prerogative among Zooley's girlfriends, and as always with BIWOTs, their primary bonds of loyalty are to one another and not to the men in their lives. One of Zooley's closest girlfriends, for example, thinks nothing of accepting a call on her cell phone from Zooley during the middle of dinner in an elegant restaurant where she has been taken on a date. Another girlfriend is married but tells Zooley without even consulting her husband that Zooley is welcome to stay with them indefinitely — for years, if Zooley likes.

Men, if they want to have relationships with BIWOTs at all, have no choice but to accept their second-tier status in the realm of emotional connectedness, and Peter does. All is fine, therefore, as he and Zooley begin to plan their nuptials. But then Peter becomes close friends with a societal iconoclast, Sydney Fife. Unencumbered by slavish conformity to the politically correct behavioral pretensions of Peter's social set, Sydney enables Peter to embrace heretofore ignored possibilities of his own individuality, and Peter becomes less concerned with people-pleasing and comfortably relaxes into a richer sense of his own self. When Peter asks Sydney to be best man at his wedding, Sydney is overjoyed.

At an engagement dinner, Peter introduces Sydney to Zooley, her fellow BIWOT girl-



friends, and other chic, moneyed, postmodern, urban elite people who are ostensibly close to Peter (but not really). In a very compelling speech, Sydney declares that Peter is “honest” and “kind” and a very *giving* man who never expects anything in return. Then, speaking directly to Zooley, Sydney says that it would behoove her to try to be giving toward Peter. Because Sydney sees right through the various social veneers of everyone in the room, however, his words are indirectly meant for the others, too.

In Sydney, Peter has not only found a pal, but an ally in the affirmation and defense of his manhood and basic human dignity. Such intimate male/male friendships used to be commonplace in our society, but, for a multitude of reasons, over the course of the past century they have become increasingly rare. Peter and Sydney do *not* relate to each other in a way that is typical of postmodern men. Far more often, at best, men occasionally enjoy friendships imbued with *some* of the affection, camaraderie and devotion that Peter and Sydney experience with each other. This is because, for all the high-minded rhetoric of the women’s movement about establishing “equality” between the sexes, the postmodern feminist woman balks (as Zooley does) at the very first hint of relinquishing any of her longstanding domination of men’s emotional lives. Sometimes, as appears to be the case with Zooley, she is too self-absorbed even to perceive how much power she wields, to the point of being utterly unaware of how badly she abuses it. Indeed, BIWOTs frequently rule in the realm of emotion with such uncompromising ferociousness (albeit in cunning, covert or superficially demure ways) that most men, like Peter until the arrival of Sydney in his life, exist in a state of complete obliviousness to their own utter powerlessness.

The Peter/Sydney friendship, then, is not so much a depiction of what exists between male friends, but the filmmakers’ wishful suggestion of what *might* exist. Indeed, the Peter/Sydney friendship has more love in it than any other relationship in the film.

But will the friendship last? It meets with trouble, and there is a temporary break between the two men. But then, at last, Zooley accepts and endorses the friendship, and the way is paved for it to thrive indefinitely. Or is it?

Tellingly, the script only permits the men to declare their love for each other — an audacious act in today’s world (and beautifully and movingly performed in the movie) — under Zooley and her girlfriends’ direct supervision. The friendship meets with their approval, and thus the film ends on an upbeat note.

But it is one matter for a woman to allow her man take to off now and then for an all-male poker game or to excuse him for a weekend of camping with a buddy or two, and quite another to tolerate an ongoing, intimate male/male relationship of such deep mutual emotional and psychological sustenance that it does not even require sex to maintain its intensity.

Women are correct when they state that there are some things about themselves to which only other women can fully relate, and the bonds of sisterhood, whether literal or figurative, are both celebrated by women and respected by men. Conversely, however, there are some things about men to which only other men can fully relate. But can 21st century men become as deeply bonded with one another as did so many of our male ancestors during, say, the 19th century? Many women give lip service to the idea that the answer is “yes,” but only a tiny minority of them will actually endorse it

with any sincerity. Among men themselves, it tends to be a subject that they would rather not even think about. It can be very scary for a man if he discovers and then begins to act upon his potential to establish a loving bond with another member of his own sex. Far more disturbing than the potential to raise neighbors' eyebrows with questions about sexual orientation is what men understand if only in an inchoate way about the catastrophic consequences they may suffer with their girlfriends and wives if a male/male friendship becomes too close for women's comfort. In all likelihood, the relationship will be punished with excoriating ridicule, belittling, scoffing, name-calling ("overgrown little boys"), and possibly outright ostracism for "failing to cherish the women in your lives." In the case of Peter and Sydney, their love for each other is well-established, and it is a thing of amazing beauty and delight. Also, it has Zooey's endorsement — for now.

But it bears repeating that she is a BIWOT. For her, then, female "empowerment," by definition, inextricably intertwines itself with the misandrist disempowerment of men. Therefore, it would be out of character for Zooey's endorsement to be anything more than a passing flight of fancy. Like most of the people watching the movie, she has never seen anything quite like this friendship before, and it can be a lot of fun to see the two men together. But once the friendship's novelty diminishes and it ceases to be so amusing for Zooey, her original endorsement of it, even if deeply sincere in the moment, is highly subject to revision.

The waxing and waning of fashionable attitudes is a pronounced aspect of feminism's history, and it may well be only a matter of time before Zooey changes her mind and sets about, slowly but surely, to destroy the Peter/Sydney relationship. In her mind, if only unconsciously, Peter will belong back in the position where familiar comfort once lay for both of them: under her thumb. If she follows this tack and fails, however, then she will probably abandon the marriage for some other lifestyle option that does not undermine her position of supremacy in the realm of emotion. The acquisition of and devotion to pets is one favorite alternative for many such women. If Zooey succeeds in destroying the friendship, she may abandon the marriage anyway, because by capitulating to her wish and dumping Sydney, her husband will now have proven how "weak" he is and thereby cease to deserve her respect.

Maybe the filmmakers see in Zooey someone much deeper and less narcissistic than the average BIWOT or someone with potential to move beyond the feminist ideological mindset. Maybe her marriage will not turn sour after all and she and Peter will continue to find happiness together. If so, then it would be delightful to see a sequel that tells this story and depicts Zooey growing personally as much as Peter has grown in the first installment. But if she does not grow, then if a follow-up sequel is ever created about the characters, basing its story in reality will very likely yield a title something along the lines of *I Love You, Man — Part 2: Zooey Throws A Tantrum And Files For Divorce*.

In *I Love You, Man*, a man's emergence into a more complete sense of himself has nothing to do with devoting himself to the fulfillment of women's or girls' wishes and being a "good" man. Moreover, it occurs through means totally contrary to any notion that he can be transformed into something he is not or be fixed via some process along



the lines of what is prescribed in *Emma & Mommy Talk to God* and controlled by the opposite sex. A man's change for the better will now occur in the company and loving support of another man.

Time will tell whether comparable uplifting depictions of male bonding will become more common in mainstream media during the years ahead. If they do, then whatever impact those representations have upon our collective consciousness (our self-perception as well as the ways in which we relate to one another) should be very interesting indeed.

Dedication

For the lovingkindness and inspiration with which they bless my life, this article is dedicated with gratitude and affection to my friends Stephen, Jim, Andrew and Bobby. — P.A.

About the Author

Peter Allemano was born in San Salvador and lives in New York, where he works full-time as a legal secretary and intermittently as a model. He writes a regular column of humor for *Transitions*, the newsletter of the National Coalition For Men. He is a founding member of the National Coalition For Men's Greater New York Chapter (✉ peter.allemano@yahoo.com).

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