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Bird's Eye

KARL ZINSMEISTER

Let Boys Be Boys

A few months ago, my 13-year-old son read James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* in school. From a teenage boy's point of view this great story of frontier life in eighteenth-century New York state has it all—Indians, Redcoats, bears, daring escapes, even a sharpshooting hero named Hawkeye. It also includes, very tangentially, a light romantic plot.

When it came time to write an essay about the story, my son enthusiastically whipped up something in you-are-there diary form, chronicling first-person battles with wild animals, racing rivers, and duplicitous enemies. As a finishing touch he added drops of artificial blood to an entry that tailed off in mid sentence!

He did not, however, mention any romance. And for that he was, to his great puzzlement, marked down a few points by his teacher (let's call her Ms. Smith). His response was, "What? I even mix up some cool artificial blood and all Ms. Smith picks up on is that?"

The written questions the teacher gave the class focused heavily on matters of the heart. Her instructions refer to "feelings" or "emotions" seven different times, as in "What are your feelings about the French and Indian War?" My son was completely stumped.

This was a schizophrenic moment for me as a parent. I told my son that the teacher is the teacher, and you have to rise to the occasion and give her what she wants. But inside, a part of me was thinking, "Gee, I would have bombed this too. Here's this rich historical backdrop. Action everywhere—arrows thunking into flesh, bodies crashing over waterfalls. And she asks about personal feelings?"

I thought of this incident as I assembled our cover story. In it, Christina Hoff Sommers argues that "progressive" reforms and exaggerated feminist attitudes have rooted so deeply in schools and other parts of American society as to sometimes make boys feel like strangers in a land where no one speaks their language.

The documentation of this problem comes not in trivial anecdotes like mine but rather in worrisome evidence which shows that over the last couple decades fewer and fewer boys have been succeeding in school. For instance, of all the U.S. high school students who don't make it to college at present, fully two-thirds are male. Boys of all income groups, races, and ethnicities are now less likely than comparable girls to work themselves into the college pipeline.

Boys from blue-collar families are particularly suffering. Among kids in families earning \$80,000-100,000 per year, girls are 8 percent likelier to be on a college track than their brothers. At family incomes of \$10,000-20,000 this swells to 56 percent likelier.

In today's schools, young boys often find it harder to sit still and digest the curriculum than their female counterparts do, suggests Marty Bolles, who works in the San Antonio city schools. Many are quickly branded discipline problems. Boys often "don't have male role models at home, due to rising divorce and single parenthood," Bolles notes, and they're even less likely to find them at school—in Texas, only 23 percent of public school teachers are men.

"When you see the aspirations of boys and girls at an earlier age, they're high," educator Gilberto Ramon recently told the *San Antonio Express-News*. Yet by the time graduation rolls around, a shrinking number of males are still successful and motivated. "So something happens between the time they have those aspirations and the time they graduate." That "something" is the subject of Sommers' investigation on pages 20-25.

One upshot: By the time today's high school freshmen leave college, only 41 percent of bachelor's degrees will go to young males, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That has tumbled from 57 percent in 1970.

Contrary to claims of male advantage, boys are not nearly so hardy as they seem. Right from conception, males are more susceptible than females to disease, developmental difficulty, and environmental damage. Although 140 males are conceived for every 100 females, 35 of these male fetuses will perish during gestation. At birth, females are four to six weeks more mature neurologically than males, a difference which persists in their earlier acquisition of language, verbal fluency, and memory retention. Boys outnumber girls by more than 2 to 1 in special education classes. Communication disabilities like stuttering and dyslexia are several times more prevalent among males than females, while reading blockages and other learning problems are three to five times as common. Males are more often color-blind and left-handed, and suffer more night terrors. They are three times as likely to be autistic, and experience much more schizophrenia, hyperactivity, delinquency, suicide, and homicide than females. They far oftener end up homosexual.

One observer has described the male as "a bundle of energies that is always threatening to disintegrate. The female is much more stable and secure." Psychologist Dee Shepherd-Look writes in the *Handbook of Child Development* that "until adulthood it is difficult to find a pathological condition in which the incidence among females is higher than among males." Even as adults, men have weaker immune systems, twice as much heart disease, less elastic blood vessels, and more alcoholism. And that doesn't even begin to get into matters like trustworthiness, closeness to God, and ability to remember a birthday. Anyone arguing that males are the "higher" sex has a lot of explaining to do.

Males are, however, different. And one side effect of this is that many young boys are now grindingly ill-matched to the schools and other institutions that receive them. Much of this is due to feminist refusal to accept the idea that boys and girls are different. The idea that there might be specifically male tendencies toward aggressiveness, stoicism, shorter attention span, lower verbal and relational skills, higher spatial and logical skills, and so forth, and that society should accept and work with these tendencies, has become politically incorrect to the point of being a firing offense. If boys act differently from girls, that's an individual defect to be cured, goes the liberal wisdom.

Elite refusal to accept the more commonsensical view that boys and girls develop to somewhat different internal rhythms is having tragic effects. "Put a boy in a school with a curriculum designed for girls and taught by women whose main desire in life is that boys behave like girls," warns author Leon Podles, "and any self-respecting boy will likely end up with the attitude of Huck Finn toward 'civilization.'"

Podles suggests that in schools today, "boys are allowed to stay if they will agree to behave like girls." Significant numbers

of boys, particularly those from poor and blue-collar families, won't go along. And "Why should they? Why can't some schools be run for boys by men?"

It would be unfair to blame all the stresses on boys today on over-zealous feminism. But feminists who attack the "mystique" of masculinity and rail against everything from professional sports to toy swords for embodying ugly male values (see professor Myriam Miedzian's book *Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence* for a run-of-the-mill example) show no understanding whatever of male psychology. Rather than fantasizing that all boys can be re-made into pliant, expressive, non-violent little model students, we ought to be seeking ways to direct male rambunctiousness into constructive uses.

It seems obvious, for instance, that the way to convert male tendencies toward aggression into something positive is through traditionally male channels and male languages. But that will require they be exposed to more authentic masculinity,

not less. The bulk of our problems with male violence today grow out of having too little masculine authority at the base of society, not too much. The most dangerous males in America are presently those raised in our inner-city matriarchies. All those rap anthems about raping and torturing

women come out of a world wholly devoid of male control.

The shock troops of America's urban decline are almost all recruited from the ranks of fatherless boys. To try to compensate for their lack of male exemplars we should be experimenting with strict all-male urban boarding schools. Perhaps these could be staffed by decommissioned military officers—who know something about how to build discipline, self-respect, and productive morale in restless young charges.

Alas, recent efforts to set up even much more conventional schools for endangered boys have been quickly squashed by feminist absolutism. A few years ago I interviewed the principals of two special elementary schools that the Detroit and Milwaukee public education systems tried to establish specifically for black boys who lack positive male direction. These were smart, tough black men trying to address a mortal crisis in their communities. And they were absolutely livid that out-of-town lawsuits brought on feminist grounds by the National Organization for Women and the American Civil Liberties Union had blocked their projects. As Leon Podles has commented in bitter amazement, "Better many black boys die bleeding from gunshot wounds than allow any government policy that presupposes there are significant differences between the male and female of the species, and that the differences sometimes work to the disadvantage of the male."

And it isn't just underclass children who are being hurt by the taboo against acting upon sex differences. In his book *Papers from the Headmaster: Reflections on a World Fit for Children*, Richard Hawley describes his gradual conversion on this subject after going to work at a private all-boys school. "I had

THE MOST DANGEROUS MALES IN AMERICA ARE THOSE RAISED IN OUR INNER-CITY MATRIARCHIES.

chosen the school because I needed the job.... I was, if anything, unfavorably disposed to the idea of an all-male student body.... But I was surprised."

Compared to co-ed schools where Hawley had taught previously, the single-sex alternative showed a special power to motivate certain boys—because it was built specifically on qualities that "have for centuries been stirringly attractive to boys." Questing, striving, weathering personal hardships and exposure to danger, adhering to ideals despite temptations not to—these "have rested at the heart of boys' schools and of boys' stories from the earliest recorded history."

Obviously there can be crummy boys' schools just as there are ill-run schools of all sorts. But there is good evidence that most boys enrolled in all-male schools do much better than boys

in co-ed schools. (See, for instance, Anthony Bryk and Valery Lee, *Journal of Educational Psychology* #78, 1986.)

Keeping the all-boys school alive for young males who need or want it is only the tip of this iceberg, however. The larger goal should be to get everyday co-ed schools—and all the other establishments that deal with boys—to be more open to the distinctive needs of each sex, and more willing to address themselves to boys and girls differently on occasions where that will serve the children better. This may sound commonsensical. But it is, alas, almost impossible under the progressive nostrums that now reign in our schools and many other public institutions.



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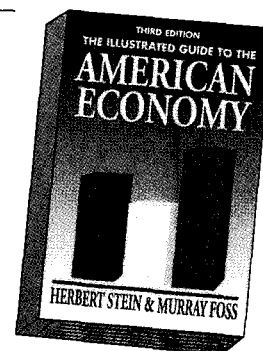
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Sidelights

A California man attempted to auction his soul to the highest bidder on eBay.com, but the company stopped the sale, saying he had no proof the merchandise existed. ♣ Governor and welfare reform pioneer **Tommy G. Thompson** is trumpeting a new study that shows three-quarters of welfare recipients who stopped receiving cash benefits under the new program have found either jobs or other means of support. "Most also had higher incomes," reports the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. ♣ Skittish about efforts to raise academic standards in the nation's schools, Education Secretary **Richard Riley** recently warned that some students are being "traumatized, not challenged." ... A recent poll commissioned by *Education Week* "raises questions about whether the standards movement has yet succeeded in changing practices and expectations in the majority of public school classrooms." Half the teachers surveyed say students are still passed based on effort, not actual learning. ... For the third year in a row, roughly three-quarters of college professors and employers report high school graduates lack good writing skills and work habits. ♣ The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts employment will rise 14 percent between 1998 and 2008, by 20.3 million jobs. ♣ This year's "green book," a Treasury Department explanation of the administration's tax proposals, is 221 pages long. Last year it was 198 pages, up from 153 pages the previous year, the *Wall Street Journal* reports. ... House Ways and Means Chairman **Bill Archer** (R-Texas) objects to "death taxes": "No one should have to visit the undertaker and the IRS on the same day." ♣ Providence College, a Catholic institution in Rhode Island, suspended three students who posted pro-abortion fliers with a picture of the Virgin Mary. The students said the flier

was meant to shock, not insult. ... An Arkansas man who "moonied" the judge trying him was given ten months in jail for contempt.

Mickey Kaus, a liberal columnist for *Slate*, writes that reporters "hate Gore. They really do think he's a liar. And a phony. They dislike the controlled, canned nature of his campaign events, and hate covering them." ... Media critic **Scott Shuger** notes that when the *Los Angeles Times* was recently bought by another newspaper company, the *Times* reported its selling price at \$6.46 billion, while the *New York Times* put the price at \$6.45 billion, the *Wall Street Journal* claimed \$5.9 billion, and the *Washington Post* said \$8 billion. ♣ As controversies flare over mixing religion and politics, the Catholic League points out the major media's silence over this scene inside the Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church in Queens, New York: Pastor **Floyd Flake** declares, "I don't do endorsements from across the pulpit because I never know who's out there watching the type of laws that govern separation of church and state.... But I will say to you this morning, and you read it well: This should be the next President of the United States." Flake then puts his arm around Vice President Gore. ♣ Even though the Supreme Court has tried to rein in "punitive damage" awards in law-

suits, the top ten verdicts in 1999 totaled \$9 billion, triple the amount for 1998 and 12 times the 1997 figure, former attorney general **Dick Thornburgh** complains. ... ABC's **John Stossel** recently profiled **Dave and Donna Batelaan**. They are both disabled and run a disabled-friendly store that sells and repairs wheelchairs and related products. Yet they were sued for not having specially marked handicapped parking spots for their almost entirely handicapped clientele. ... The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defended in court a man who was denied a train dispatcher's job because of a condition that can cause him to lose consciousness: "While consciousness is obviously necessary to perform" the job, the agency conceded, "it is not itself a job function." ♣ A study of Washington, D.C. students attending private schools on privately funded vouchers found that black elementary school students were happier with their schools and outperformed their public school peers in math. ... The SAT now tracks home-schoolers' performance. Last year home-schoolers averaged 67 points above the national average, even though their family incomes were below average. ♣ The City Council of Boulder, Colorado, voted unanimously to add "gender variance"—"a persistent sense that one's gender identity is incongruent with one's biological sex"—to the city's Human Rights Ordinance. The Council did, however, permit employers to require a "reasonably consistent gender presentation," defined as limiting workers to three gender changes each 18 months. ♣ A new business book, *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break*: **W. C. Fields on Business**, recalls the comic's advice: "If at first you don't succeed, try again. Then quit. There's no use being a damn fool about it." —SW

