

BOOK REVIEWS

Men's Stories for a Change: Ageing Men Remember
by **Randy Barber, Vic Blake, Jeff Hearn, David Jackson, Richard Johnson, Zbyszek Luczynski, Dan McEwan**

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This is an unusual and very insightful book, not easy to place in a particular tradition or discipline. It features personal stories of several older profeminist men who met together over a thirteen-year period to compose and discuss personal reflections on thematic aspects of masculinities. The methodological approach is grounded in Frigga Haug's (1987) memory-work approach to excavating and collectively understanding gendered ways individuals construct their identity. The authors make it clear in their introduction that the passages are not meant to be confessional. On the contrary, "the mode was care and critique, not therapy" (p. xxvi). Haug states: "memory-work must, then, contain an element of practical questioning; it is not concerned purely and simply with a search for new insights" (1987, p. 69). Given the years the authors committed to the Older Men's Memory Work Group, during which time some men left the group and one passed away before publication, it became clear that the text was, indeed, "a product of a kind of 'slow research' into and on our lives that can now be interrogated, analysed and critiqued by others" (p. xxvii). The stories in this book offer a unique perspective of diverse men who took up the call to be allies with women in the women's movement from the 1970s to the present, who valued a critical examination of masculinity and male privilege, and who are now co-constructing their identities as older/ageing men.

The book is structured around eighteen themes ranging from "Ageing" to "Sport," and from "Sexuality and Relationships," to "Saying Goodbye to Mothers." The writing that the

different men in the group composed for each other to better understand the intersections of their own gendered subjectivities, is personal, at times raw, often intimate. Each theme includes an introduction with some light discussion of how the men's reflections address elements of the theme. However, such personal narratives can be problematic because they often refuse, or repel, critique. This, in turn, makes writing a review of the book challenging.

As a profeminist and critical gender scholar, I am often cautious of research and writing that re-centres the male experience, especially that of privileged white males. I was, at first, quite hesitant about the potential contribution of these stories. Trinh T. Minh-ha asks: "How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind?" (1989, p. 28). However, in reading the book, I was surprised. Despite the provocative title, this collection explicitly resists telling a predictable tale. Rather, it offers self-critical narratives of men's lives. The process these men took in questioning themselves in relation to violence, work, power, politics, schooling, and fathers and fatherhood, to name but a few themes, inevitably exposes an insecurity that undercuts the ubiquity of male privilege, and this, in turn, creates the potential for change. The trust that these men shared with one another, and later with their readers, was not one that kept secrets and closed doors to others. Instead, the composite narrative offered acute observations to help to unpack late-stage masculinity. One man reflected: "In the past when I did not have many real personal relationships with men, I relied on my football team and their exploits for emotional nurturing" (p. 74). While the passages were written on the spot for the authors' memory group, they represent mature thoughts about the way men process gendered contradictions. The texts carefully navigate the ironies of powerful and painful bodies, ethically ageing, struggling and celebrating. The subtle critiques of the everyday lead to a number of insightful moments. In one reflection on the subject of "Power" one of the authors writes: "...our early experiences of being oppressed [through bullying] shape or disturb our later exercise of power, as privileged men in unequal relationships or hierarchical institutions" (p. 135). There has been a lot of hype in the developed world about the need for more male role models, but rarely do we define what an ideal male role model should be. While there may not be one single agreed recipe, one might hope that this would involve the consideration of men who have critically contemplated masculinity for many years. Another author notes: "greater wisdom seems to come with ageing which allows some relaxation in the fierce self-accusatory inner dialogues of a more youthful self" (p. 121).

Critiques of masculinity are as numerous as the diversity of men. What I particularly enjoyed about this collection was the conscious re-evaluation of male lives lived; the agency of returning. Walter Benjamin remarked: "One who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil" (Jennings, 1999, p. 576). This book illustrates the significant potential of memory-work to break new ground toward a more nuanced understanding of male ageing, remembering, and rethinking masculinities. The activism of these men is not recounted in any detail in this work, but the reader gets the sense that in composing thematic narratives they are conscious of

telling an untold story and perhaps accomplishing the unfinished business of earlier generations of men who struggled with the tensions, insecurities, and power of masculinities. The authors nicely sum up the importance of the book by stating: “only when we conceive of ageing men as people in constant motion and movement do we begin to appreciate more fully the subjectivities of ageing men and begin to catch further glimpses of the surprising richness of their complex contradictory lives” (p. 192). Documenting this movement of critically self-reflexive ageing men offers rich guidance for those who seek change.

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