



Questioning manhood

Australian author Stephen Biddulph has written a best-selling book about men but Gerry Orkin believes that *Manhood* misses the mark.

Manhood: A book about setting men free
Steve Biddulph
Finch, 1994, 216 pages, \$19.95

ACCORDING to Tasmanian psychologist, family therapist and best-selling author Biddulph, there are seven "steps to manhood": the resolving of our relationships with our fathers, the finding of sacredness in our sexuality, the meeting of our wives (sic) on equal terms, active participation in parenting, making good male friendships, finding work we can believe in and, lastly, freeing our "wild spirit". *Manhood* explores each of these areas in an attempt to chart the problems and possibilities confronting men in the nineties.

In general I like the way the topics are explored and summarised with steps for further action laid out at the end of each chapter. I also like the author's jaunty style of writing—it's warm and engaging, a tone appropriate for men who may be examining these issues for the first time. I also like the sense of hopefulness and excitement that runs through the whole book.

I'm left feeling troubled, however. While Biddulph accurately describes many of the difficulties that men face and is positive about men's ability to change I found the underlying assumptions about how our problems arise, and more importantly the things that men need to do to solve them, woefully inadequate.

At its essence *Manhood* is an uncritical reinterpretation of the writings of Robert Bly. I counted over one hundred quotes from Bly and other mythopoetic men's movement identities throughout the book. The author has done a good job in making

Bly accessible but he fails to address many problematic aspects of the mythopoetic/ritual movement's analysis of men's situation.

Like Bly, Biddulph suggests that men's difficulties are primarily the result of "under-fathering" and a lack of healthy male role models for boys. In some ways this is true. Many men *have* missed out on good, close relationships with their fathers and few of us have had close, intimate relationships with other men, especially as adults. I also agree that it is useful, even essential, for men to resolve our relationships with our fathers and to build good friendships with other men—but I have a couple of problems with the notion that this is a central solution to men's difficulties.

I'm troubled by the suggestion that men need wise male elders to guide us through the world. My own experience is that younger men and children of both sexes have been my greatest inspiration and source of learning, while older men have tended to pass on to me only their sadness, bitterness and anger. I guess it's a question of how you define wisdom—I prefer the fresh, volatile wisdom of people of all ages

to the sometimes interesting but not necessarily better wisdom of my elders. Taken to extremes (and I have witnessed this in men's groups) this notion could end up looking a lot like ritualised adulthood. No thanks!

My main concern, however, is the way this focus on absent fathers ignores the social and political context within which men negotiate their lives. By all but removing masculinity from the context of gay oppression, racism, classism, religion and the oppression of young people and women, Biddulph misses many of the significant things that shape our sense of ourselves and which frame our relationships with others. While he correctly identifies isolation, competitiveness and emotional difficulties as the bars of men's prison, the forces of patriarchy, capitalism and homophobia—the prison itself—are not directly confronted or even considered.

One implication of all this is that men's path towards freedom is portrayed as a journey located solely within our confusion about our roles, rather than as a quest that integrates personal healing and social responsibility. I suspect Biddulph was



Bookwatch

By Michael F

The future of white men: dilemmas, by Joan Stein Press, \$16.95, Berkeley). witty and inspiring guide to diversity issues. Lester J. sensible personal strategies and inclusive fashion. G

Erotics and politics: gay masculinity, and feminism (Routledge, \$34.95, New York). relationship between the and of gender, and in gay men's studies and a wide range of contemporary gay liberation, le: promiscuity, postmodernity. Focuses on male sexuality and mas

Hungry hearts: on male esteem, and addiction, by (Lexington Books, \$45). back of this book asks, much more vulnerable. What can men do to throes of addiction and deficiencies within themselves. explanation is "society's and exaggeration of me toughness, at the expense." There you go. I think books.

Doing 'women's work': traditional occupations, edited by Williams (Sage, \$45), summarises the state of the effects of men in mansions—effects on the men of masculinity, on the women they work v

Masculinity and the Man since 1945, by Michael University Press, \$75, C explores the intimacy among men in management the myth of the rational shedding new light on women from management

The stutterer's survival (Addison-W. One percent of and more than two-thirds men. Tunbridge, a student now maintains his fluency as a guide to managing

worried that such a focus would make men feel bad about themselves, a possibility I'll acknowledge exists. I'm confident, however, that he has the skills and sensitivity to do a good job of it.

I'm also worried that readers will be left without an understanding of feminism's central importance to men. In *Manhood* feminism is portrayed as something that isn't for us; it's "about women liberating themselves...[we can only] cheer from the sidelines". Yes, feminism is women's business. It's about women claiming their fair share of influence and resources and taking charge of their relationships with men. It is also about challenging injustice, violence and sexual assault, among other things.

To suggest that we can be detached bystanders ignores our central role in sexism—a role that we did not ask for but

This limited view of the contribution that feminism can make to the development of a new masculinity is sad to see in such a popular book. Biddulph also makes no mention of Men Against Sexual Assault groups, even in the contacts pages at the back—a strange and frustrating omission that I hope will be corrected in the next edition.*

I also have problems with the assumption that there is an essential masculinity, an assumption that is threaded through the pages of the book, if not actually clearly articulated. For instance, in the chapter "Sex and spirit", male sexuality is described as "a huge energy source which pushes us towards union with a partner and release from the ordinary". This is chillingly similar to the notion that men are driven by deeply rooted sexual forces which are out of our control (and therefore not our responsibility).

My own experience of counselling men suggests that our preoccupation with sex is often a reflection of our desperation to feel close to other human beings and to feel powerful within ourselves (and sometimes to feel more powerful than others). Elevating sex to the status of a spiritual quest serves to give justification for our obsession with it. I'd suggest that rather than re-constructing our sexuality as spiritual, men should perhaps question why it is that sex feels so important, explore and take responsibility for the actual dynamics that make up our sexual relationships and figure out how else we may meet our real needs for intimacy and closeness.

This review is more than just a little critical of *Manhood*. To provide some balance I'd like to praise Biddulph for writing a book that obviously comes from his heart, with the best of intentions. I just hope that the men who find resonances of their own lives and experiences within its pages use it as a first step, not the last, in their journey towards a good life. ●

*Since writing this review I have spoken with the publisher of *Manhood* about the lack of anti-sexist group contacts in the book. The publisher has assured me that these details will appear in the next edition.

Men's path towards freedom is portrayed as a journey located solely within our confusion about our roles.

which we have an ethical responsibility to relinquish. This means, at times, listening to women and acting on their reasonable demands. It does not mean blind obedience—feminism is not perfect. (It does not, for example, adequately acknowledge the many ways that many men are hurt by the dominant construction of masculinity.)

Biddulph does make some attempt to address issues like domestic violence and acknowledges that feminism is the most important social movement of our times, but he misses a perfect opportunity to passionately encourage men to stand up and actively support the rights of women to social equality, safety and choice. I'd also suggest that he could do better than to buy into the stereotyping of pro-feminist men as being in "danger of dying from self-flagellation". Far from being timid and apologetic, most men I know in the anti-sexist men's movement are proudly and positively male. They could provide some good role modelling for many of the older men in society that Bly and Biddulph claim hold the key to healthy masculinity.

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