

Boys' Secrets and Men's Loves: A Memoir

David A. J. Richards

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Boys' Secrets and Men's Loves is a crusading text that argues that women, LGBTQIA individuals, and cisgender straight men ought to band together to salvage democracy.

Part memoir, part philosophical treatise, David A. J. Richards's *Boys' Secrets and Men's Loves* argues that the patriarchy inflicts trauma on boys, harming men as well as women.

The Harvard graduate and New York University School of Law professor's ruminative book examines his initiation into patriarchy as a gay man born into a traditional Italian-American family in New Jersey during the final days of World War II. It deconstructs the passive and uncritical acceptance of codes of masculinity in a thorough and thoughtful way. It lays out an alternative path, suggesting that men join women in resisting the oppressive hegemony of the patriarchy through avenues like art, literature, and philosophy.

The work wastes no time in demonstrating its intellectual heft, quoting James Baldwin, Dante Alighieri, and Herman Melville. It critiques institutional practices and sometimes toxic pop culture while citing the work of Charles Dickens, Henry James, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Philip Roth. For all its rigor and gravitas, it is a bizarre and inexplicable omission that the book does not devote a single chapter to a woman thinker or writer in its scathing and comprehensive criticism of the patriarchy. While it quotes women authors, it's men who undergird its structure.

Provoked by the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the book also considers why so many white men felt threatened by a black president followed by an overqualified woman candidate and bemoans, in the words of Susan Faludi, that a "misogynist could defeat the first feminist political candidate." It credits the trauma of manhood for so many men believing that Trump's election was in their interest, even at the expense of democracy.

Narrated from the self-declared perspective of a "pariah and outsider to American manhood," the book also explores violence, guilt, and other staples of the narrow patriarchal construct of masculinity. It draws on Richards's personal experience to show how people can take an ethical stand against injustice in the forms of homophobia, racism, and misogyny, seeking to ground the moral imperative of resistance in the events of Richards's life. His intellectual coming-of-age drew upon the work of other writers that helped form his principled stand against patriarchal rule, and the throughline of his development of thought is traced with clarity.

Loaded with footnotes and allusions to canonical novels, the book's intellectual seriousness and sense of heightened purpose are pervasive. Its arguments are compelling, passionate, and personal. Structured like an essay collection, its order is incidental; its entries are disparate.

Boys' Secrets and Men's Loves is a crusading text that argues that women, LGBTQIA individuals, and more enlightened cisgender straight men ought to band together in a valiant bid to salvage a democracy under unprecedented assault.

JOSEPH S. PETE (February 3, 2020)

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