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Geise, Rachel. (2018). Boys: What it Means to Become a Man.
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Rachel Geise's book, "Boys: What It Means to Become a Man" is a poignant and perceptive collection of research regarding the concept of masculinity, and how our definition of masculinity affects boys and men in our contemporary society. In her book, Geise invites the reader to question what it means to be a man and theorizes that prescribed gender roles and expectations of boys can be damaging to boys, men, and society in general. Geise is an award-winning Canadian journalist who regularly contributes to CBC Radio and is an editor with *Chatelaine* magazine. She began researching this topic in 2015 (p. 383). This book draws its information from a plethora of sources including popular culture; national and international statistics; in-depth interviews with parents, educators, men's health program managers and activists; esteemed authors on the subject of gender studies, feminism, criminology, psychology, and sociology. The book is also peppered with personal anecdotes and experiences regarding the author's personal and family life including her adopted Indigenous son who has been diagnosed with multiple developmental delays and learning disabilities.

Geise is concerned with "challenging gender stereotypes and their effects on boys" (p. 21). Geise argues that our contemporary society is not proactively concerned with these matters and that they have only been examined in response to alarming research and statistics on poor educational performance and high rates of depression and suicide, or specific events such as school

shootings and sexual violence, (p. 22). Geise questions what it means to identify as a boy and whether or not boys are truly possess innate behaviors and traits such as aggression or poor academic performance, or if these trademark *boyish qualities* are the result of prescribed gender expectations set out for them long before they were born (pp. 23-24). Geise challenges her readers to question their definition of masculinity and to broaden and transform the concept into healthy expectations, patterns of thinking, and behaviors that will benefit not only men, but people and children of all genders (pp. 26-27).

Geise discusses the young, tender age at which boys already have concrete definitions of masculinity and what boys are supposed to think, say, and do. The sociological term *The Man Box* is used throughout this book to refer to these rigidly defined expectations that society has of boys and men, and the way that boys and men internalize (and externalize) these expectations (p. 32). Geise synthesizes international research regarding men's beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes toward traditional masculinity as well as the relationship between these beliefs and attitudes and levels of health and safety in men. She found that the more invested men are in *Man Box* masculinity, the more likely it is that they will suffer from depression, engage in riskier behavior such as unprotected sex and binge-drinking, and be either the victim or perpetrator of violence (p. 49). They may also be lonelier: for many men, a strong attachment to traditional masculinity means a fear of being perceived as anything but masculine (soft, feminine, or gay) and this may impede their ability to create and maintain meaningful connections with other men. Geise refers to this concept as the "masculinity tax: platonic male intimacy requires a rejection of homosexuality and a hostility toward anything that seems unmanly" (p. 111).

Geise provides the reader with a rich and detailed history of the construct of gender in our

society, the beginnings of our modern definition of masculinity, and the way that societal standards and norms of male intimacy and friendships have changed over time. She weaves a rich linear tapestry beginning with the late eighteenth century when men and women began to be viewed as separate and unequal entities (with women being viewed and treated as inferior to men) to the mid-1940's when society became concerned with toughening up men and encouraging a "colonial imperialist kind of masculinity" in which organizations with religious roots such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) sought to produce upstanding and courageous young men brimming with self-discipline and stoicism (p. 55). The advancement of technology eventually led to more free time for youth, and to more concern about how boys should and should not behave. *The War on Drugs* in America, rashes of school shootings and mass killings committed by young men, and dismal reports on boys' academic performance have brought the *boy crisis* to the forefront of contemporary issues. Geise implores the reader to ask, "What if the crisis isn't about boys but, rather, masculinity?" (p. 59).

Geise suggests that constructs of gender and gender roles begin before a child has even been born. Expectations of having either a baby girl or a baby boy are already implanted in the minds of expecting mothers and fathers and are reflected in their purchases and behaviours: from gender reveal parties that consist of hyper-masculine or uber-feminine colours and themes, to gendered clothing and toys for babies and toddlers, and even the preconceived notions of what their unborn child will be like according to their predicted gender. Gender self-awareness begins for children at around eighteen months of age (p. 90). Children may subscribe to and accept their assigned sex at birth and incumbent expectations of that gender identity. However, many children will come to identify as transgender or nonbinary and at earlier ages than ever before due to more

progressive views on gender expression and fluidity in our society. For children that are born as boys and identify as male, challenges await. Research indicates that “from as early as infancy, boys are subtly, even unconsciously, coached to ignore or stifle their emotions, and are perceived by adults as being aggressive or hostile” (p. 121).

A strong theme in this book is that of intersectionality and how factors such as race and socioeconomic status affect how boys attach themselves to the idea of masculinity. Marginalized groups of boys such as those living in poverty, Indigenous boys in Canada, and Black boys in America may be particularly negatively affected by social constructs of masculinity and the male identity. Boys who have mistrust toward authority figures due to racist encounters and/or are labelled as disruptive or as *trouble-makers* by educators may cling to toughness and invulnerability as a way of coping, thereby fulfilling the prophecy of being labelled as typical boys. Boys from impoverished neighbourhoods with high rates of crime may latch onto traditional ideas and definitions of masculinity as a way to survive. If boys come into conflict with the educational system at a young age, it is more likely that they will come into conflict with law enforcement and the justice system later in life. The higher rates of diagnoses of intellectual and learning disabilities and disorders in boys as well as the tendency for educators to favour girls in the classroom also work against boys. *Zero tolerance* policies in schools exasperate the feelings of exclusion that young boys may feel. By expelling boys who misbehave, our educational system may eventually propel them into the prison system. This concept is referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 150).

Geise believes that in order to move forward with a healthier idea of what it means to be a man, we must raise our boys with more acceptance and understanding. She concludes by inviting

the reader to encourage vulnerability in boys and to foster in them the skills to express their feelings in healthy ways. We must also listen to them and project empathy and understanding unto boys and men of all ages. She also asserts that the power balance between men and women must be equalized and that in order for both genders to thrive, one cannot be above the other. True feminism refers to women being treated the same as men and that involves "educating and encouraging boys the way we are educating and encouraging girls" (p. 317).

Though I consider myself highly open-minded, I appreciated how thought provoking and challenging this book was and thoroughly enjoyed reading it. Geise manages to keep the tone of her writing informal and accessible to the average person while delivering her ideas in a concise and intellectual manner. I believe this book aims to reach those in the disciplines and professions of social work, psychology, mental health and addictions, and psychiatry (both child & adult) as well as parents and educators. Additionally, I would recommend this book to everyone that I know regardless of their gender. As a woman, it provided insight to the male experience that I did not previously have, and it opened my eyes to some of the struggles that boys of today are facing. In the future, I would love to read more on male perspective and feedback on this book and find out how research such as this affects the average man; perhaps it may allow them to become more vulnerable, communicate more easily, and cut themselves some slack.