Giese, Rachel. (2018). Boys: What it Means to Become a Man.
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Rachel Gieses' book, "Boys: What It Means to Become Man," complicates the mainstream narrative about traditional masculine identity and compares the dynamics of male and female gender roles within a contemporary world. Giese intends to transform the discussion on gender identity, toxic masculinity, and misogyny by connecting reporting, cultural analysis, and personal narrative - notably, she recounts her journey of understanding gender and masculinity while raising her adopted son. She expands on her metaphorical yet fictional theory of the "Man Box," in which young men feel trapped in a socialized realm where to feel or show any emotion is a setup for shame and anxiety. Giese also delves into the sexuality struggles and griefs building friendships, emphasizing the fear of same-sex intimacy among boys. The author organizes her content using snippets of her authentic experiences while deliberately tying into the consequences of language as an underlying theme.

In order to first begin detoxifying masculinity, Giese first explores the conception of the "Man Box," which portrays the alleged perception and embodiment of masculinity and manliness and the principles needed to be a true man within society. According to Giese, men who desire to fit into the "Man Box" often internalize and strongly follow seven standards of masculinity: (a) self-sufficiency; (b) toughness; (c) physical attractiveness; (d) traditional and rigid gender roles; (e) heterosexuality; (f) sexual prowess; and (g) aggression to solve conflict (p. 11). Particular traits

and labels that fall outside the "Man Box" tend to be linked with femininity and sensitivity - the absolute opposite of the masculine essence. Labels like "pussy", "bitch," or "faggot" (p. 111) involve underlying relation to weakness, vulnerability, and unmanliness. These words are negatively perceived in nature, further contributing to the harmful effects of "boy talk" on young men.

Prominently, the author stresses how these standards have significant consequences on young men and those around them. For instance, her research has found that boys who maintain the "Man Box" attitudes are often more prone to become victims of alcohol abuse, depression, and loneliness (p. 13). Additionally, these men are more likely to be the perpetrators of violence or sexual harassment against women (p. 13). Such negative impacts cause boys to be less inclined to seek psychological and emotional guidance and hold intimate friendships (p. 14).

A young man's ability to develop same-sex friendships is reflected in their security concerning their level of masculinity. Homosexuality was brought to light around the mid-1800s while the nuclear family dynamic was still most prevalent. During this time, society viewed homosexuality as corruption and a threat to Victorian values (pp. 53-54). This fear remained constant, transitioning into modern-day shifts, where male same-sex platonic friendships are inherently suspicious. A stark divide between being "buddies" and "lovers" came about, resulting in men withdrawing from creating close bonds between each other to avoid stigmatization and homophobic labels.

Giese parallels the gender differences between intimate same-sex friendships of men and women. She describes how women are not shamed for their capacity to care for one another,

understanding that gender norms allow women to express their emotions with each other without disrupting their femininity (p. 54). However, this notion did not follow suit with boys; in fact, it merely created a stricter rule of masculinity requiring men to prohibit their desires for close male friendships internally. Failure to abide by this rule usually involves slurs and put-downs. Giese quotes sociologist C.J Pascoe's observation of these harmful labels, stating, "Becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine task of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as it does with sexual identity" (p. 5).

Furthermore, any act deemed as homosexual or too feminine is followed by the late 1990s phrase "no homo" (p. 56), said to contradict any homosexual notations as well as to affirm one's heterosexuality. Giese terms this interaction as the "masculinity tax" (p.56), where platonic male intimacy demands an assured denial of homosexuality and aversion toward anything deemed unmanly.

Giese describes this pressure for boys to remain independent from close same-sex platonic relationships as a "boy crisis" (p. 58), which has had a drastic psychological and social effect on adolescent boys. For example, Giese quotes fourteen-year-old Kai, stating, "You need a friend or else you'd be depressed, you won't be happy, you would try to kill yourself." (p. 59). Kai's statement reveals how essential friendship is to young men and their emotional and social development. This desire to bond with other boys over girls is innate in adolescents - primarily due to their shared emotional terrain (p. 60).

Giese demonstrates a clear depiction in her writing: boys are not naturally inclined to fit into the "Man Box," but they are instead heavily influenced by a set of social behaviours and

expectations prescribed at birth. She quotes: "much of what boys and girls are drawn to is the result of socialization and savvy marketing, not intrinsic preferences" (p. 34). From themed gender reveal parties to gender-targeted toy commercials, Giese highlights the impact of gender roles set upon children growing up. Western society has always understood masculinity as "tough, strong ... emotionless, and heterosexual" (p. 1). Parents will consciously or subconsciously enforce these traits using opposing extremes - little girls play dress-up, little boys play with toy guns.

Giese references her experience with her son in conforming to gender-based video games, particularly touching on the violence and aggression of boy-centric games. She illustrates how alarming the normalcy of hyper-violent games are and how their target audience always seems to be straight white men. In asking her Indigenous son questions like "why do female characters tend to be sidekicks or victims?" and "why are so few male heroes Asian, black, or Latino?" (p. 142), she demonstrates the substantial lack of representation for minorities in pop culture, and how these gaps can have negative consequences on adolescent self-esteem (p. 143).

This dichotomy reflects the underlying image that gender roles aim to achieve: women should identify with innocence and domesticity and men with power and control (p. 25). Giese provides some understanding of why most parents stick to gender-typed toys for their young boys. First, she discusses how boys who transgress into the "pink zone" (the interest in girl-targeted toys and hobbies) are prone to homophobic backlash from peers (p. 36). This concept circles back to Gieses' "Man Box," where femininity and vulnerability are frowned upon in social settings, ensuing harsh social stigma for their child. Second, the parents often desire gender conformity due

to their experiences growing up. The author references sociologist Elizabeth Sweet when she quotes, "nostalgia also comes into play, as parents and grandparents like to give children toys, they remember from their own childhood" (p. 35). Regardless, society generally feels uneasy with gender fluidity, explaining the deeply rooted male and female roles (p. 35).

By incorporating personal experiences, anecdotal evidence, historical background, and cultural analysis, Rachel Giese provides compelling insight into the male experience. I appreciate her use of scholarly insight and first-hand observations of her son's experience with manhood; however, I contemplate whether the direct voices of boys and men could have been more accurate in confirming the theories provided by the scholars. Perhaps a more fitting interview population could have increased the external validity of the conclusions produced. Regardless, her work suggests a significant reality check of how toxic masculinity impacts the lives of both boys and girls. Mothers and fathers would be a suitable academic audience for Gieses' work, especially considering the book is written from a parental perspective. Various disciplines would also benefit from this book, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, and gender studies. I found Gieses' work engaging, informative, and incredibly touching; she offers a fascinating perspective on masculinity and what it means to become a man.