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Modern Masculinity Is Broken. She Knows How to Fix It.

By David Marchese
Photograph by Mamadi Doumbouya

With the arrival of her part memoir, part manifesto "How to Be a Woman" in 2011, Caitlin Moran established herself as one of her generation's funniest and most fearless feminist voices. Moran, who is 48 and who first made her mark in the early 1990s as a wunderkind music journalist for British publications, has published four ribald and emotionally honest books of nonfiction and two novels since then and has continued to work as a columnist at The Times of London. Now, with her new book, "What About Men?" Moran turns her eye to what she sees as the limited and limiting discussions around modern masculinity. It's a book she felt duty-bound to write. "All the women that I know on similar platforms," Moran says, speaking about fellow writers, "we're out there mentoring young girls and signing petitions and looking after the younglings. The men of my generation with the same platforms have not done that. They are not having a conversation about young men. So given that none of them have written a book that addresses this, muggins here is going to do it."

There's a lot of generalizing in your book when it comes to men: They're obsessed with band T-shirts and emotionally inarticulate and constantly talking about their balls. Is it possible that relying so heavily on those kinds of jokey stereotypes and clichés risks undercutting the deeper points you're trying to make about the need to open up possibilities for how we think and talk about masculinity? I'm a mainstream writer. If I'm going to start talking about a difficult idea, I want to approach it in the most successful way possible. You need to start with a generalization that is going to get people to go either, "Yes, I recognize myself in that," or, "No, I don't agree." Maybe a lot of people are going, "Men *are* emotionally literate, they can talk to each other," but I sat

down to watch “The Bear,” which has been lauded everywhere, and it’s about men who can’t talk about their emotions. I see that as a far more clichéd depiction than anything that I’ve done in this book.

Part of the framing of your book is that there’s not enough discussion about young men’s struggling to adapt to changing ideas about masculinity. I feel as if that’s a big topic of conversation these days. So what is the fresh thinking that you’re bringing to it? Feminism has a stated objective, which is the political, social, sexual and economic equality of women. With men, there isn’t an objective or an aim. Because there isn’t, what I have observed is that the stuff that is getting the most currency is on the conservative side. Men going: “Our lives have gotten materially worse since women started asking for equality. We need to reset the clock. We need to have power over women again.” We are talking about the problems of women and girls at a much higher level than we are about boys and men. We need to identify the problems and work out what we want the future to look like for men in a way that women have already done for themselves.

What should the future look like for men? It feels that every so often a book about men comes out and a small conversation flares up, and the conclusion, usually, is, “It’s a thing you should sort out yourselves, men!” There’s no sense of a continuing conversation; of there being a new pantheon of men being invented all the time;[1] then those inventions’ embedding themselves more firmly in the mainstream. Look at Beyoncé or Phoebe Waller-Bridge: When we invent a new kind of woman or a new way of talking about women, it gets quickly absorbed into the mainstream. Whereas in the male conversation, it doesn’t feel like something that spreads out across other genres. It sort of happens in isolation. But my book is going: “I can see what is happening in women’s lives and how it’s benefited us. There is something equivalent that you men can do. Why don’t you give it a go?”

Why has it been harder for the left than the right to gain the kind of currency you mentioned earlier? Men on the liberal left, while feminism was having this massive movement, they were like, OK, we’re not going to start talking about men while this is happening. They sat it out for a decade, and now their sons have grown up in an era where they have heard people go, “Typical straight white men; toxic masculinity,” and those sons are like, “[expletive] this,” because they don’t see what a recent corrective feminism is to thousands of years of patriarchy. They have only ever known people saying, “The future is female.” So they are quite rightly going, “Who’s going to say something good about the men?” The people that they’ve seen are Andrew Tate.[2]

Beanie Feldstein in the 2019 film "How to Build a Girl," adapted from Caitlin Moran's semi-autobiographical novel. IFC Films, via Everett Collection

You have such a distinct writing style. Do you ever worry that leaning on style can get in the way of more closely examining your ideas? An example that I'm thinking about is in the section of the new book where you write about Jordan Peterson's crying during a podcast interview.[3] I'm no admirer of Jordan Peterson,[4] at all, but I thought that moment could be seen as a positive one in which this well-known masculinity guru was showing emotional vulnerability in public, which isn't the worst thing to model. But you turn that moment into a punchline. Is that a spot where your inclination to go for the joke and set Peterson up as a one-dimensional foil might have kept you from examining that moment more productively? Jordan B. Peterson sells himself as a stoic. An incredibly successful man whom I see as being very merciless and pitiless to women, suddenly boohooing and crying? When women with comparable levels of fame and pressure would never think about talking about it like that in public? I dislike that disparity. So that's Jordan B. Peterson. But my writing style: Especially when you're writing in a column, you have to work very tight, punchy. I've never written anything I don't believe — not since my teens. When I first became a columnist, they were like, "You need to write about the realities of teenage life in 1990s Britain." I had no idea what teenage life was like in 1990s Britain because I never left the house. So I would write a tortured, dark column about anorexia and my friend who would eat toilet paper in order to not be hungry. Which was something that I'd seen on a medical drama! But since I was 18, I've never written

anything that I don't believe.

You used to write a lot of celebrity profiles. Can you tell me a good anecdote about a famous person that you've never told before? The New York Times would never publish it. Absolutely filthy.

Try me. [Moran tells an epically filthy story about a British one-hit wonder from the 1990s.] You're not printing that, are you?

No.[5] See!

There's a sentence in the new book that I was curious about, and this goes back to the questions about the trickiness of generalizing and of using a certain kind of rhetorical style: You're discussing the rarity of false accusations of date rape, and you write, I'm paraphrasing, that there are mentally ill or damaged women who will make those kinds of accusations, and the only thing a young guy can do is not have sex with damaged or mentally ill women. That's a bit of a flip way of addressing that problem, isn't it? That's possibly my most overt piece of feminism. Obviously #NotAllMen, but I have experienced enough men where the thing at a party is that you're hunting for the girl on the edge of the pack who's a bit drunk, bit needy. I can remember dads telling their sons in pubs where I come from,[6] "Crazy bitches are always the best [expletive]." It's just saying to men as a kind and loving mother with some wisdom that if there's a woman who is mentally ill, disturbed or needy or unhappy or really drunk at a party, leave her alone. The last thing she needs is a penis. If she's an upset, needy person and you [expletive] her and then the rumor starts going around school, she might need to, for the defense of her reputation, say, "He raped me." You've put yourself in a dangerous situation because you've done a foolish thing.

Let me ask about a sentence from an earlier book that also struck me. In "How to Be a Woman," you write that you wanted to reclaim the term "strident feminist" in the same way that the hip-hop community reclaimed the N-word. Is that a sentence you wish you could have back? The fact that I wrote that, then it was reviewed, it sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and there's one person[7] who's brought that up in the last 10 years tells you something. Which is that when that book was written, that is how we were talking. So although I wouldn't use that comparison again, we forget what was normal. We talked about women in such an inhuman way back then, and it was seen as normal. At that time, if you said you were a feminist, it was presumed that you were a lesbian, angry, penis-removing, academic no-fun bitch. The least sexy thing to do was to try and detoxify that brand. One of the ways that

you do that is to go in and say you are not ashamed to say feminist. Go all the way: Say *strident* feminist. But the technique that I used was not correct.

Moran onstage in London during a 2014 book tour. WENN Rights Ltd/Alamy

How do you think the public discussion of feminism has changed since "How to Be a Woman"? I think the younger generation of feminists are even more open-minded and openhearted and sincere in what they do. But the downside is that a lot of the humor and the lightheartedness and the ability to ask a question about an idea has gone. The thing that I observe in younger women and activists is that they're scared of going online and using the wrong word or asking the wrong question. As a result, we're not having the free flow of ideas and questions that makes a movement optimal. We appear to have reinvented religion to a certain extent: the idea that there is a sentient thing watching you and that if you do something wrong, it will punish you. God is very much there in social media. I feel that having been born in an era before social media, I grew up godless, and it made me a lot freer than my daughters' generation.

What's an idea that people are afraid to talk about more openly? Trans issues. In the U.K., you are seen to be on one of two sides. It's the idea that you could be a centrist and talk about it in a relaxed, humorous, humane way that didn't involve two groups of adults tearing each other to pieces on the

internet.

What does it mean to be a centrist on trans issues? In the U.K., you are either absolutely 100 percent pro trans rights, or you would be a TERF[8] going: "You are just men with your cocks torn off. You're either born a woman or you are not." The idea that you can go in the middle and go, "Let's look at facts and research and talk to people"? You can't ask those kinds of questions or look for those statistics. If you say anything about this issue, you are claimed by one side or the other. Ironically, it's very binary for a subject that takes nonbinariness as its central thesis.

Research on Gen Z attitudes suggests that they're more open to gender fluidity than older generations.[9] What are the implications of that for how we understand masculinity moving forward? I can walk around leafy liberal North London and see boys in dresses with nail polish who are using mixed pronouns and go, "Look at the progress here." On the other hand, as soon as I go back to my hometown, I am not seeing boys walking around in sarongs and using mixed pronouns. In those places you would be going straight in at the deep end by starting a conversation about masculinity by going, "Maybe gender shouldn't exist." It's better to start, which is why I've been general in this book, with a sketch of masculinity that people in normal towns who haven't gone to amazing schools and don't read fancy books would recognize. Then you can lead into, "Hey, why don't we all be David Bowie?"

In "More Than a Woman,"[10] there's a chapter focused on your daughter's eating disorder and suicide attempts, and you link her struggles to the hopelessness of the story that young people are being told about the future. I don't know if you're on the other side of those struggles, but is there anything that you learned from that experience that could be applicable to the alienation that so many young men are feeling? That's a great question. I grew up in a family where no one gave a [expletive] if you were depressed or anxious. So you would just have to make a joke about it or eat your feelings. Which is why I became a very fat young girl. So when my daughter became ill, I was scared of her sadness and her depression, and the only tools I knew to cope with it would be jokes. Then I would give her TED Talks and try to educate her out of it. Then I became Jesus Christ. I decided I was going to cry on my cross and go, "If your own sadness doesn't make you want to get better, then maybe my sadness would help you get better." None of those things worked. The lesson is that when someone keeps coming to you and saying they are sad and depressed and anxious, you just have to listen and take them for their word. Which is why I wrote this book, because young boys do keep saying, We are anxious, we are depressed, we are lonely. All you can do is be right next to them and go: "I'm going to be with you through it. I actually can't

fix you. You are going to have to fix yourself." I thought I could make my daughter better. But she did have to make herself better. That's the scariest thing as a parent. But that is how kids get better. They have to be able to do it themselves.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity from two conversations.

David Marchese is a staff writer for the magazine and the columnist for Talk. He recently interviewed Alok Vaid-Menon about transgender ordinariness, Joyce Carol Oates about immortality and Robert Downey Jr. about life after Marvel.