

For the Love of Men: From Toxic Masculinity to a More Mindful Masculinity

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Book Review

For the Love of Men: From Toxic Masculinity to a More Mindful Masculinity

By Liz Plank

St. Martin's Press, 2019, 336 pages (hardcover)

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Toxic masculinity is both a term and a concept that has been used widely in recent years to discuss problematic behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes that many argue support the legitimization of the patriarchy. Conversations in media and public life surrounding toxic masculinity as a pattern of behaviour, or belief system, often miss the mark by not attempting to understand the roots of the problem with nuance, care, and empathy. Society takes a greater issue with men who exhibit toxic masculinity than with the systems and social scripts that create those men. Rather than simply acknowledging that toxic masculinity exists and calling it out as it presents itself in social spaces, author Liz Plank meticulously seeks to understand and discuss the roots and harm traditional masculinity creates in contemporary society, with care, compassion, understanding, and empathy. Her keen observations are approachable, deeply thoughtful, professionally researched, and funny. Plank's work explores and examines gender equality and inequality from a perspective that suggests that current frameworks are incomplete, as they do not adequately address the lives of men or masculine identity and acknowledges that boys and men also suffer under traditional views of masculinity. *For the Love of Men* is an important work that encourages readers to not only challenge their own assumptions and beliefs regarding masculinity, but to also examine the ways in which we unconsciously reinforce toxic

masculinity and to urgently address fundamental threats to the well-being and safety of individuals, local communities, and global communities.

Plank examines societal problems through a gendered lens that includes men and masculinity. Plank (2019) acknowledges that there has been a great deal of research on gender theory and the impact of patriarchy on women, but also admits to never having considered the impact on men until speaking with them, when she discovered a misalignment (and multiple falsehoods) in what society had told her about masculinity. Plank invites the reader into this examination of masculinity in two parts: first, “The Lies We Tell About Men” and secondly “I Love Men.” Each section is broken down into well-researched chapters and conversations that seek to draw people into the conversation rather than calling anyone out. Personal narratives from men with diverse identities and differing global perspectives are inserted between select chapters to compliment and contextualize Plank’s thoughts, ideas, challenges, and research and to humanize the research. These narratives help readers to reflect on their assumptions around the legitimacy of toxic masculinity and its pervasiveness across all identities, while acknowledging that some are harmed at greater levels than others in this hierarchical system of identity.

Using this approach, Plank (2019) views masculinity as a solution to current problems rather than the issue feminism must address. She explores men’s pain despite their privilege to illustrate this point. For Plank (2019), the concepts of men’s pain and privilege are not mutually exclusive, nor does speaking about masculinity detract from the very real forms of harm women experience because of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. Rather, Plank (2019) emphasizes the need for further conversations about masculinity to create the conditions for men to experience and express their full humanity and to free society of gender rules; not by removing them entirely, but by taking parts that make sense while leaving behind those that do not. Plank’s vision of the future is one in which the emphasis is no longer placed on men and women and their societal expectations, but rather that it evolves into conversations between those who reject the constraints of the current system (Plank, 2019). This distinction is an important nuance that, when considered and reflected upon, illustrates how crucial the liberation of men from traditional masculinity is for the improvement of social and gender equality; the healing of men will work to heal communities.

Throughout *For the Love of Men*, Plank aims to assess the damage caused by raising men in a society that imposes a gender binary through pervasive social scripts,

institutions, and policies. Plank thoughtfully and masterfully assesses this guiding imposition by examining the ways society both subtly and overtly reinforces traditional masculinity beginning in childhood by stating that toxic masculinity reveals itself "...in the way we're more comfortable with the image of a boy playing with a toy gun rather than a boy playing with a toy doll, because we're more comfortable seeing a boy hold something that kills rather than something that cries" (p. 2). This line struck me to my core and left me gutted while audibly saying "wow..." This statement is bold and shocking, but it provides an effective motivation to seeing the ways in which boys and girls experience life very differently.

Plank (2019) goes on to discuss the subtle teachings that work to limit the humanity and self-expression of young boys in favour of the pursuit of strength, which she suggests differs from how girls are raised. Society views and equates emotions with weakness, which is why boys are taught strength in the face of all else, while girls are expected to show and feel their emotions – we see this inequality in the human experience as boys are demanded to repress, control, and hide their emotions (Plank, 2019).

For the Love of Men, is an approachable, thoughtful, and at times, crushing examination of the pain men experience as the result of toxic masculinity, while acknowledging the complicated relationship that exists at the intersection of power, privilege, and oppression. Plank (2019) concludes by asserting that the path forward for men and society is through mindful masculinity, which is a reclamation of masculinity itself. For Plank (2019), values and attributes of traditional masculinity can be updated for contemporary society by shifting how we define and understand values such as strength, bravery, and the role of the protector. In this new system and understanding of mindful masculinity, Plank (2019) suggests that strength is in the acknowledgement of emotions and being equipped with the tools to navigate them; bravery is found in the examination of oneself and controlling one's life, while suggesting that responsibility for oneself is love and protection of others.

A strength of this work lies in the care and openness Plank expresses while challenging her own beliefs about masculinity. Plank (2019) leaves the reader with an encouraging sense of the future that adopting mindful masculinity as the new hegemonic masculinity will work to not only improve the well-being of men, but also work harmoniously to provide more effective solutions to addressing gender inequality. Perhaps the greatest success of *For the Love of Men* is in its ability to spark a desire to delve deeper into this

subject. While this work is bold in assertions, thoughtful in its research, and compassionate in its exploration of pain, it is one that should be used to challenge long-held beliefs and assumptions about men, their privilege and power, and the need for the reclamation of masculinity to support healthy individuals and communities.

Reference

Plank, L. (2019). *For the Love of Men: From Toxic to a More Mindful Masculinity*. St. Martin's Griffin.