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Where have all the real men gone?

Top American columnist Kathleen Parker is causing a furore with her new book *Save the Males*, in which she argues that feminism has neutered men and deprived them of their noble, protective role in society

I know. Saving the males is an unlikely vocation for a 21st-century woman. Most men don't know they need saving; most women consider the idea absurd. When I tell my women friends that I want to save the males, they look at me as if noticing for the first time that I am insane. Then they say something like: "Are you out of your mind? This is still a male-dominated world. It's women who need saving. Screw the men!"

Actually, that's a direct quote. The reality is that men already have been screwed – and not in the way they prefer. For the past 30 years or so, males have been under siege by a culture that too often embraces the notion that men are to blame for all of life's ills. Males as a group – not random men – are bad by virtue of their DNA.

While women have been cast as victims, martyrs, mystics or saints, men have quietly retreated into their caves, the better to muffle emotions that fluctuate between hilarity (are these bitches crazy or what?) and rage (yes, they are and they've got our kids).

In the process of fashioning a more female-friendly world, we have created a culture that is hostile towards males, contemptuous of masculinity and cynical about the delightful differences that make men irresistible, especially when something goes bump in the night.

In popular culture, rare is the man portrayed as wise, strong and noble. In film and music, men are variously portrayed as dolts, bullies, brutes, deadbeats, rapists, sexual predators and wife-beaters. Even otherwise easy-going family men in sitcoms are invariably cast as, at best, bumbling, dim-witted fools. One would assume from most depictions that the smart, decent man who cares about his family and pats the neighbour's dog is the exception rather than the rule.

I am frankly an unlikely champion of males and that most hackneyed cliché of our times – "traditional family values". Or rather, I'm an expert on family in the same way that the captain of the Titanic was an expert on maritime navigation.

Looking back affectionately, I like to think of home as our own little Baghdad. The bunker-buster was my mother's death when she was 31 and I was three, whereupon my father became a serial husband, launching into the holy state of matrimony four more times throughout my childhood and early adulthood. We were dysfunctional before dysfunctional was cool.

Going against trends of the day, I was mostly an only child raised by a single father through

all but one of my teen years, with mother figures in various cameo roles. I got a close-up glimpse of how the sexes trouble and fail each other and in the process developed great empathy for both, but especially for men.

Although my father could be difficult – I wasn't blinded by his considerable charms – I also could see his struggle and the sorrows he suffered, especially after mother No 2 left with his youngest daughter, my little sister.

From this broad, experiential education in the ways of men and women, I reached a helpful conclusion that seems to have escaped notice by some of my fellow sisters: men are human beings, too.

Lest anyone infer that my defence of men is driven by antipathy towards women, let me take a moment to point out that I liked and/or loved all my mothers. In fact, I'm still close to all my father's wives except the last, who is just a few years older than me and who is apparently afraid that if we make eye contact, I'll want the silver. (I do.)

My further education in matters male transpired in the course of raising three boys, my own and two stepsons. As a result of my total immersion in male-dom, I've been cursed with guy vision – and it's not looking so good out there.

At the same time that men have been ridiculed, the importance of fatherhood has been diminished, along with other traditionally male roles of father, protector and provider, which are increasingly viewed as regressive manifestations of an outmoded patriarchy.

The exemplar of the modern male is the hairless, metrosexualised man and decorator boys who turn heter-osexual slobs into perfumed ponies. All of which is fine as long as we can dwell happily in the Kingdom of Starbucks, munching our biscotti and debating whether nature or nurture determines gender identity. But in the dangerous world in which we really live, it might be nice to have a few guys around who aren't trying to juggle pedicures and highlights.

Men have been domesticated to within an inch of their lives, attending Lamaze classes, counting contractions, bottling expressed breast milk for midnight feedings – I expect men to start lactating before I finish this sentence – yet they are treated most unfairly in the areas of reproduction and parenting.

Legally, women hold the cards. If a woman gets pregnant, she can abort – even without her husband's consent. If she chooses to have the child, she gets a baby and the man gets an invoice. Unarguably, a man should support his offspring, but by that same logic shouldn't he have a say in whether his child is born or aborted?

Granted, many men are all too grateful for women to handle the collateral damage of poorly planned romantic interludes, but that doesn't negate the fact that many men are hurt by the presumption that their vote is irrelevant in childbearing decisions.

NOTHING quite says "Men need not apply" like a phial of mail-order sperm Continued on page

2 Continued from page 1 and a turkey-baster. In the high-tech nursery of sperm donation and self-insemination – and in the absence of shame attached to unwed motherhood – babies can now be custom-ordered without the muss and fuss of human intimacy.

It's not fashionable to question women's decisions, especially when it comes to childbearing, but the shame attached to unwed motherhood did serve a useful purpose once upon a time. While we have happily retired the word "bastard" and the attendant emotional pain for mother and child, acceptance of childbearing outside marriage represents not just a huge shift in attitudes but, potentially, a restructuring of the future human family.

By elevating single motherhood from an unfortunate consequence of poor planning to a sophisticated act of self-fulfilment, we have helped to fashion a world in which fathers are not just scarce but in which men are also superfluous.

Lots of women can, do and always will raise children without fathers, whether out of necessity, tragedy or other circumstance. But that fact can't logically be construed to mean that children don't need a father. The fact that some children manage with just one parent is no more an endorsement of single parenthood than driving with a flat tyre is an argument for three-wheeled cars.

For most of recorded history, human society has regarded the family, consisting of a child's biological mother and father, to be the best arrangement for the child's wellbeing and the loss of a parent to be the single greatest threat to that wellbeing. There's bound to be a reason for this beyond the need for man to drag his woman around by her chignon.

Sperm-donor children are a relatively new addition to the human community and they bring new stories to the campfire. I interviewed several adults who are the products of sperm donation. Some were born to married but infertile couples. Others were born to single mothers. Some reported well-adjusted childhoods; some reported conflicting feelings of love and loss.

Overall, a common thread emerged that should put to rest any notion that fathers are not needed: even the happiest donor children expressed a profound need to know who their father is, to know that other part of themselves.

Tom Ellis, a mathematics doctoral student at Cambridge University, learnt at 21 that he and his brother were both donor-conceived. Their parents told them on the advice of a family therapist as their marriage unravelled.

At first Tom did not react, but months later he hit a wall of emotional devastation. He says he became numb, anxious and scared. He began a search for his biological father, a search that has become a crusade for identity common among sperm-donor children.

"It's absolutely necessary that I find out who he is to have a normal existence as a human being. That's not negotiable in any way," Tom said. "It would be nice if he wanted to meet me, but that would be something I want rather than something needed."

Tom is convinced that the need to know one's biological father is profound and that it is also every child's right. What is clear from conversations with donor-conceived children is that a father is neither an abstract idea nor is he interchangeable with a mother.

As Tom put it: "There's a mystery about oneself." Knowing one's father is apparently crucial to that mystery.

Something that's hard for many women to admit or understand is that after about the age of seven, boys prefer the company of men. A woman could know the secret code to Aladdin's cave and it would be less interesting to a boy than a man talking about dirt. That is because a woman is perceived as just another mother, while a man is Man.

From their mothers, boys basically want to hear variations on two phrases: "I love you" and "Do you want those fried or scrambled?" I learnt this in no uncertain terms when I was a Cub Scout leader, which mysteriously seems to have prompted my son's decision to abandon Scouting for ever.

My co-Akela (Cub Scout for wolf leader) was Dr Judy Sullivan – friend, fellow mother and clinical psychologist. Imagine the boys' excitement when they learnt who would be leading them in guy pursuits: a reporter and a shrink – two intense, overachieving, helicopter mothers of only boys. Shouldn't there be a law against this?

We had our boys' best interests at heart, of course, and did our utmost to be good den mothers. But seven-year-old boys are not interested in making lanterns from coffee tins. They want to shoot bows and arrows, preferably at one another, chop wood with stone-hewn axes and sink canoes, preferably while in them.

At the end of a school day, during which they have been steeped in oestrogen by women teachers and told how many "bad choices" they've made, boys are ready to make some really bad choices. They do not want to sit quietly and listen to yet more women speak soothingly of important things.

Here's how one memorable meeting began. "Boys, thank you for taking your seats and being quiet while we explain our women's history month project," said Akela Sullivan in her calmest psychotherapist voice. The response to Akela Sullivan's entreaty sounded something like the Zulu nation psyching up for the Brits.

I tried a different, somewhat more masculine approach: "Boys, get in here, sit down and shut up. Now!" And lo, they did get in there. And they did sit. And they did shut up. One boy stargazed into my face and stage-whispered: "I wish you were my mother."

Akela Sullivan and I put our heads together, epiphanised in unison and decided that we would recruit transients from the homeless shelter if necessary to give these boys what they wanted and needed – men.

As luck would have it, a Cub Scout's father was semi-retired or between jobs or something – we didn't ask – and could attend the meetings. He didn't have to do a thing. He just had to be

there and respire testosterone vapours into the atmosphere.

His presence shifted the tectonic plates and changed the angle of the Earth on its axis. Our boys were at his command, ready to disarm landmines, to sink enemy ships – or even to sit quietly for the sake of the unit if he of the gravelly voice and sandpaper face wished it so. I suspect they would have found coffee tins brilliantly useful as lanterns if he had suggested as much.

But, of course, boys don't stay Cub Scouts for long. We've managed over the past 20 years or so to create a new generation of child-men, perpetual adolescents who see no point in growing up. By indulging every appetite instead of recognising the importance of self-control and commitment, we've ratified the id.

Our society's young men encounter little resistance against continuing to celebrate juvenile pursuits, losing themselves in video games and mindless, "guy-oriented" TV fare – and casual sex.

The casual sex culture prevalent on university campuses – and even in schools – has produced fresh vocabulary to accommodate new ways of relating: "friends with benefits" and "booty call".

FWB I get, but "booty call"? I had to ask a young friend, who explained: "Oh, that's when a guy calls you up and just needs you to come over and have sex with him and then go home."

Why, I asked, would a girl do such a thing? Why would she service a man for nothing – no relationship, no affection, no emotional intimacy?

She pointed out that, well, they are friends. With benefits! But no obligations! Cool. When I persisted in demanding an answer to "why", she finally shrugged and said: "I have no idea. It's dumb."

Guys also have no idea why a girl would do that, but they're not complaining – even if they're not enjoying themselves that much, either.

Miriam Grossman, a university psychiatrist, wrote *Unprotected*, a book about the consequences of casual sex among students. She has treated thousands of young men and women suffering a range of physical and emotional problems related to sex, which she blames on sex education of recent years that treats sex as though it were divorced from emotional attachment and as if men and women were the same. Grossman asserts that there are a lot more victims of the hookup (casual sex) culture than of date rape.

Casual sex, besides being emotionally unrewarding, can become physically boring. Once sex is stripped of meaning, it becomes merely a mechanical exercise. Since the hookup generation is also the porn generation, many have taken their performance cues from porn flicks that are anything but sensual or caring.

Boys today are marinating in pornography and they'll soon be having casual sex with our

daughters. According to a study by the National Foundation for Educational Research issued in 2005, 12% of British males aged 13-18 avail themselves of "adult-only" websites; and American research findings are similar. The actual numbers are likely to be much higher, given the amount of porn spam that finds its way into electronic mailboxes. If the rising generation of young men have trouble viewing the opposite sex as anything but an object for sexual gratification, we can't pretend not to understand why.

The biggest problem for both sexes – beyond the epidemic of sexually transmitted disease – is that casual sex is essentially an adversarial enterprise that pits men and women against each other. Some young women, now fully as sexually aggressive as men, have taken "liberation" to another level by acting as badly as the worst guy.

Carol Platt Liebau, the author of *Prude*, another book on the havoc that pervasive sex has on young people, says that when girls begin behaving more coarsely so, too, do boys.

"And now, because so many young girls have been told that it's 'empowering' to pursue boys aggressively, there's no longer any need for boys to 'woo' girls – or even to commit to a date," she told me. "The girls are available [in every sense of the word] and the boys know it."

Men, meanwhile, have feelings. Although they're uncomfortable sorting through them – and generally won't if no one insists – I've listened to enough of them to know that our hypersexualised world has left many feeling limp and vacant.

Our cultural assumption that men only want sex has been as damaging to them as to the women they target. Here is how a recent graduate summed it up to me: "Hooking up is great, but at some point you get tired of everything meaning nothing."

Ultimately, what our oversexualised, pornified culture reveals is that we think very little of our male family members. Undergirding the culture that feminism has helped to craft is a presumption that men are without honour and integrity. What we offer men is cheap, dirty, sleazy, manipulative sensation. What we expect from them is boorish, simian behaviour that ratifies the antimale sentiment that runs through the culture.

Surely our boys – and our girls – deserve better.

As long as men feel marginalised by the women whose favours and approval they seek; as long as they are alienated from their children and treated as criminals by family courts; as long as they are disrespected by a culture that no longer values masculinity tied to honour; and as long as boys are bereft of strong fathers and our young men and women wage sexual war, then we risk cultural suicide.

In the coming years we will need men who are not confused about their responsibilities. We need boys who have acquired the virtues of honour, courage, valour and loyalty. We need women willing to let men be men – and boys be boys. And we need young men and women who will commit and marry and raise children in stable homes.

Unprogressive though it sounds, the world in which we live requires no less.

Saving the males – engaging their nobility and recognising their unique strengths – will ultimately benefit women and children, too. Fewer will live in poverty; fewer boys will fail in schools and wind up in jail; fewer girls will get pregnant or suffer emotional damage from too early sex with uncaring boys. Fewer young men and women will suffer loneliness and loss because they've grown up in a climate of sexual hostility that casts the opposite sex as either villain or victim.

Then again, maybe I'm completely wrong. Maybe males don't need saving and women are never happier or more liberated than when dancing with a stripper pole. Maybe women should man the barricades and men should warm the milk. Maybe men are not necessary and women can manage just fine without them. Maybe human nature has been nurtured into submission and males and females are completely interchangeable.

But I don't think so. When women say, "No, honey, you stay in bed. I'll go see what that noise is" – I'll reconsider.

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