

Boys Without Men

Caitlin Flanagan's review of my book *Raising Boys Without Men* ("Boys Will Be Boys," November Atlantic) says little, if anything, about my findings but speaks volumes about the widespread, fear-based ideology that stigmatizes single mothers and two-mother couples. Buried deep in her review is a grudging admission that single mothers throughout history have often raised their sons with great success. Otherwise Flanagan completely misses the point.

The experience of actual families clearly demonstrates that non-nuclear families are neither more nor less equipped to raise healthy sons. Parents who succeed do so because they are caring and supportive, spend time with their children, and nurture those children's independence. The mothers I studied have not "decided to stop cooking and let the kids nuke potpies for dinner." On the contrary, they spend more time with their children than heterosexual couples do, and are home for dinner more often.

That "masculinity arises naturally" is not my belief; it is a scientific finding that was as surprising to me, as a straight mother, as it is to Flanagan. Reality often has the power to surprise. What surprised me more was that Flanagan thinks I am afraid of straight men, because I have been married to one for many years and raised two strong, healthy children with him. If I thought boys raised without men were actually better off, I would have a lot of explaining to do to my twenty-six-year-old son. The real question is, Are the sons of single mothers and lesbian couples worse off (as so many people assume), or can these mothers succeed in raising strong, healthy, independent sons?

Ideology aside, the answer is a resounding yes. That's a good thing, because the proportion of American families headed by women has grown by 50 percent since 1980. At the same time, families headed by heterosexual couples now represent just 23 percent of all households, and that number is shrinking every year. We can argue about the reasons until the cows come home. But if we really care about children, we will stop denying reality and judging their parents, and start supporting families of all kinds.

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