

## Reviews / Comptes rendus

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### A Familiar Story

*Men of Stone*. Gayle Friesen. Kids Can, 2000. 216 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-782-7.

The story is familiar: a fifteen-year-old boy, Ben, lives with his mother and three sisters, and he must cope with the various difficulties that growing up in such an environment presents. Although his father has been dead for ten years, his death still haunts the family. The action takes place during a visit from a somewhat distant relative, the elderly Aunt Frieda. As you might expect from my brief sketch, Ben initially resists his aunt, but as time goes by this resistance eases and the two become friends. In fact, Aunt Frieda touches all the members of the house, leaving each one wiser than before her visit. She is, as the intertextual reference informs us, a version of Mary Poppins. The narrative delivers what we sometimes dismissively call a “feel-good” story. At its centre is a message for young male readers, a message that promotes non-violence: what this book teaches is pacifism.

And so we might step back and consider this book before dismissing it as a “feel-good” story. Gayle Friesen pursues a number of interests, but the most insistent is her concern with growing boys. *Men of Stone* participates in the debate about boyhood that we see in books such as *Real Boys* (1998) by William Pollack and *The War Against Boys* (2000) by Christina Hoff Sommers. Sommers argues that “when the father is absent, male children tend to get their ideas of what it means to be a man from their peers. Fathers play an indispensable civilizing role in the social ecosystem; therefore, fewer fathers, more male violence” (130). *Men of Stone* is not so certain about this; Ben’s father is absent and consequently Ben has found difficulty establishing his masculine identity. In fact, he carries a somewhat feminine image to school, partly because of his interest in dancing. As Ben says, growing up in a house with four females has placed him in situations that serve “to seriously screw with my precarious male psyche” (13). His mother and sisters never tire of telling him “about the man he should never become: the know-it-all, the brute, the insensitive goof, the guy-who-never-listens,” but they neglect to tell him about the kind of man he should become (152). To find male role models, Ben looks to comics, science fiction books, and Hollywood films. In other words, Ben’s role models are men of action capable of absorbing pain and dishing it out in retaliation. *Men of Stone*: heroes memorialized in stone, “statues of men on horseback, men holding rifles” (97).

Ben's image of the heroic male comes not only from film and books but also from his mother. When he was younger, Ben took dance classes because he wanted to do so, and he was an exceptionally good dancer. He stopped because of the teasing he encountered at school. But we know that his mother concurred with his decision to stop dancing because of her conviction that the image of the dancer is unmanly. Ben's mother tells Aunt Frieda that he is "not a fighter, and that's what you need to survive" (125). Overhearing this conversation helps Ben resolve to become a fighter. What clinches his decision is the beating he takes at the hands of the school bully, Claude, and his mates. After the beating, Ben goes to the gym and takes boxing lessons, bent on revenge.

Even before the beating, Ben had injured an arm at school in an altercation with Claude. At that time he ignored the school nurse's warning: "These are dangerous times, Ben.... Don't be heroic" (62). Aunt Frieda senses the turmoil Ben is going through, and she suggests he emulate two unconventional heroes, Ghandi and Jesus (152). She also tells Ben of his family's Mennonite background and of her own struggle to accept the pacifist practice of Mennonite life. Near the end of the book, Ben has a talk with the minister of a local Mennonite church, and later, at the crucial moment when he is on the verge of fighting and exacting his revenge, he decides against the use of force. Instead he is willing to absorb pain and pass through it.

As you can see, *Men of Stone* tries to offer young male readers understanding of the difficulties they find entering maturity as males. The book tries to show that masculinity is something gained, but not necessarily at the expense of sensitivity and grace. To be masculine, one does not have to be loutish and aggressive and violent. If anything is troubling about this picture, it is the clarity with which it presents a vision of masculinity that is tough, resilient, and straight. *Men of Stone* hints that Ben's trouble at school stems from a perception some have that he is gay. Friesen masks the theme with the suggestion that Claude really sees Ben as a rival for the attentions of the girl, Kat. The word "gay" never appears in the book. Nor do any other words that might indicate clearly that what is at issue here is a binary vision of masculinity as either straight (and hence aggressive, violent, and angry) or gay (and hence passive, effeminate, and weak). Friesen wants to offer young males a vision of straight masculinity that is also tough and capable of fighting. At the end, we know that Ben could have knocked Claude's block off if he had chosen to do so, but he chose not to, making him superior to Claude. We also know that he found the experience of learning to box exhilarating. Boxing is a form of dance, and Ben can combine his love of dancing with a manly art. It seems we still have not managed to find a masculinity that can escape from that irritatingly insistent warrior within. Ben remains a warrior, just one who chooses not to fight.

### Works Cited

- Pollack, William. *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. New York: Owl, 1998.
- Sommers, Christina Hoff. *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

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