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Raising Boys Without Men–The New Feminist Fantasy

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Does a boy need a dad? Peggy Drexler argues that a new generation of boys is being raised by a corps of “maverick moms” who are redefining parenthood, reshaping masculinity, and proving themselves to be superior to fathers in the raising of sons.

In her new book, *Raising Boys Without Men*, Drexler claims to present findings from her research project on moms raising boys without men. An assistant professor of psychology and psychiatry at Cornell University and “a former gender scholar” at Stanford University, Drexler is an ardent advocate for the normalization of single motherhood and lesbian parenting. Her new book represents a manifesto for the redefinition of marriage, parenting, masculinity, and issues beyond. The book has been warmly received by the mainstream media and is likely to be cited long into the future.

Drexler begins by noting and celebrating the modern assumption that “the mom-dad-and-kids version of family is now less than definitive.” She gets right to the trend that has caught her interest: “More and more children in the Western world are being raised not in the traditional nuclear family but by single or divorced parents, stepparents in ‘blended families,’ adoptive parents, and grandparents. An increasingly large number are being raised by mothers who are single and who have not divorced a husband or been abandoned by a man; these mothers are single by choice and have made a conscious decision to have a baby and find a sperm donor to do it. Lesbian couples and single mothers by choice are pioneering new ways of getting pregnant via donor insemination.”

Following the familiar feminist line of argument, Drexler charges that, in the aftermath of Freud, “mothers have been inculcated with the idea that we need to cut our sons’ cords to make them men ready to take on masculine roles in the world, from working towards worldly success to making war.” She notes that the traditional understandings “contended that mothers who reared sons without the presence of an active father—or who were married but ‘overbearing’ or raising ‘mama’s boys’—instill lifelong psychic disability, schizophrenia, or, worst, homosexuality in their sons.”

The phenomenon of mothers raising sons without men became Drexler’s research project for her doctoral degree. As she concedes, “The idea of lesbian mothers raising America’s sons causes many raucous debates.” Some readers will be startled by her claim that there may be as many as five million lesbian mothers currently raising children in the United States. Thus, Drexler focused her research project on one simple question: “Could sons prosper through the power of mothers alone?”

Drexler’s research focused on single moms raising boys without husbands, and then shifted to lesbian moms and “single mothers by choice,” who conceived sons by donor insemination. Drexler spent hours interviewing the moms and their sons, and *Raising Boys Without Men* is, at least in part, the distillation of Drexler’s research.

Nevertheless, Drexler often shows her hand when it comes to the ideological bias that pervades her work. In the first place, Peggy Drexler is not a disinterested researcher. She is an advocate for homosexual marriage and the transformation of gender roles. Her “research” involved as participants women—and lesbian couples—who volunteered for the project and were quite willing to have Drexler “investigate” the status of their parenting and the developmental progress of their boys. Given the structure of the study, the “results” are entirely predictable. Beyond this, Drexler at times acknowledges the ideological foundation of her work. After referring to the dominant theory that the presence of a father is important to the

development of his son, Drexler retorts: “While the implicit presumption governing the discourse is that healthy child development depends upon parenting by a heterosexual couple, I came to rely on a controversial literature that challenges the commonly accepted risks of fatherlessness.” This new book adds one more volume to the library of that “controversial literature.”

Drexler’s book is subtitled, “How Maverick Moms Are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men.” The “maverick moms” that Drexler describes are a “new breed of mothers” who are raising children without fathers. “This new breed of mothers without fathers is likely to be financially secure, straight or gay, and of any age and any race,” she explains. “Whether these women are divorced or never married, mothering singly and in pairs has not only entered the popular culture and become acceptable; it also is now considered chic.”

Those who assume that Drexler’s argument comes down to the fact that single moms *can* raise healthy boys are in for a surprise. In essence, Drexler argues that moms—singly or in lesbian pairs—are actually *superior* to heterosexual couples in raising boys.

Early in the book, Drexler points to what she calls “the dark side of matrimony.” Pointing to married couples in conflict, she asserts: “A high-conflict marriage or a marriage that isn’t working can negatively affect children in a way that might never happen in a single-mom family.” That is a ridiculous argument, of course, for a single person cannot possibly experience marital conflict. Arguing that single parents are free from the risk of marital conflict is like arguing that those who do not eat thereby reduce the risk of food allergies.

Why do so many in our society view single motherhood in a negative light? This problem is often posed with specific reference to the role of single mothers in raising sons. Drexler acknowledges that researchers often identify the absence of a father as a major statistical indicator of boys having problems. Yet, Drexler simply dismisses this entire body of research by suggesting that the researchers are “blaming the mom instead of the economic situation of the family.”

In response to the prevailing research and dominant moral understandings, Drexler makes her case: “I have found there is absolutely no reason to expect that single or gay moms cannot raise sons on their own.” Further, “They are real mothers raising real boys, boys who should not be marginalized in the least. These boys may not live with biological fathers, but they are in no way illegitimate. The families their moms have created are as real and as legitimate as any other, and have much to teach everybody who cares about children.”

No one should doubt Peggy Drexler’s enthusiasm for these sons being raised without fathers. She identifies “mom-raised sons” as “avatars of a new social movement” that is producing a new and vastly improved understanding of manhood and masculinity.

These boys do understand that they are unique. Many refer to an anonymous sperm donor as their “seed daddy.” The sixteen boys she studied in her research had no father in the home. “Many of them did not even know the names of their fathers—nor did their mothers. Thanks to the technological revolution of anonymous-donor insemination, the identity of a founding father may not even be part of the basic proposition of a two-mother family or a single-mother family.” Donor insemination now “yields many different sorts of families,” she celebrates.

The social status of her research subjects is not without importance. “The lesbians I studied were mostly white-collar workers who have succeeded as business people or in their professions,” Drexler acknowledged. She identified these women as “social saboteurs,” who have “exhibited the will and temperament to buck prevailing notions and create their own family structures, with very few models from which to work.” They see themselves as pioneers of a new social movement.

What about the boys? Drexler insists that the boys “were not sissies or mama’s boys.” She rejects the argument that boys raised by mothers alone compensate for the lack of a father figure with exaggerated aggressiveness. She further insists that boys raised by lesbian mothers “are no more likely to become homosexual than they would if raised in heterosexual families.” She does acknowledge that, certainly by the time of their adolescence, “sons of gay parents will have to establish the terms of their sexuality with more self-consciousness than most other teenage boys will.”

How do these boys deal with the absence of a father? Drexler is forced to acknowledge that many of these boys “still long for a live-in father.” But is this a sign of “father hunger” as commonly assumed to be found among fatherless boys?

Drexler dismisses the very idea. "As any parent will tell you," she asserts, "children are not born asking for Daddy, nor do they have any idea what 'daddyness' means to their mother except through her own expressions. If the lack of an everyday live-in father is not an issue for a loving and attentive maverick mom or two, so-called father hunger might not be an issue for her son." Then again, Drexler must realize that this argument is not going to get her very far.

"Will some little boys trail after men they don't even know, perk up at those lower-decibel voices, or hang on to the pant legs of the men who cross their paths? Maybe. Do they need a male to take them to the bathroom? Okay. But is that pathological father hunger? I don't think so," she insists. Drexler actually goes so far as to argue that sons "with secure attachments to their female caretakers are no more at risk of experiencing 'father hunger' than boys in the general population."

So, how does Drexler explain the fact that boys without fathers want a dad? "It's only natural to long for what you don't have," she claims.

But Drexler doesn't end with this dismissive (if utterly unconvincing) assertion. She goes on to argue that boys raised by moms alone are likely to develop a superior masculinity to that of boys with fathers. "Sons have a hard time accepting those characteristics in their fathers that cannot be changed, and even into adult life spend enormous amounts of energy wishing, hoping, fantasizing, and trying to transform their fathers into the loving models they never were and most likely can't be," she insists. Once again, Drexler's logic crosses into absurdity. She focuses on the virtues of highly motivated "maverick moms" and on the liabilities of dead-beat dads and simply chooses not to acknowledge the obvious benefit boys receive by the presence of loving, masculine, supportive, normal fathers.

Boys without fathers have "the opportunities to select role models from a myriad of sources" Drexler explains. This offers "psychological benefits and [may] even serve as an antidote to the intensity of the often strained, distant, or hostile relationships that some boys from heterosexual families have with their fathers." Drexler actually celebrates the fact that boys without fathers never have to worry about earning "daddy's respect."

One lesbian mom quickly pointed to the fact that her son was never pushed toward success and risk by a father. "Not having a dad has let Henry off the hook," she explained, "since he doesn't do well if he's pushed into things."

As Drexler sees it, boys without fathers are free to choose whatever role models in the larger society may seem most admirable and attractive. "With their mothers acting as their guides, the sons and the nonconventional families I studied actually ended up with a wider selection of male role models than the boys from the more traditional families, where the father was often the sole adult male in his son's life."

The book does include some humorous anecdotes, sure to bring a smile to any male brave enough to read it. One lesbian mom lamented the rambunctious nature of her son's behavior. She gave him a blow-dryer so that he could pretend to be a hairdresser. "The first thing he did when he pulled this baby blue hairdryer was to hold it up like a gun and point it at me and go, 'Ooh!' He didn't say, 'Bang, bang,' thank God, but it was like 'I'm going to get you!' and I thought 'Oh, nooo. Where did this come from?'" Another "single-by-choice" mom attempted to shield her sons from all notions of aggression. Nevertheless, "By age 7, despite his mother's ban on plastic toy guns, Mac and his younger brother chewed their morning toast into a pattern to make pistols and shoot each other."

Raising Boys Without Men is a sign of things to come. The utopian fantasy presented within this book is the ultimate fulfillment of the feminist dream—the evolution of a society that transcends manhood and the need for fathers. The women Peggy Drexler celebrates in this book need and want nothing more than the use of gametes from "seed daddies" who have no further role in the lives of their sons.

Of course, the feminists would never allow this equation to be reversed, even in hypothetical form. A book arguing that young girls do not need mothers and that girls raised by homosexual men are likely to be healthier than those raised by moms because they can select their own female role models and pioneer a new paradigm of femininity would be roundly condemned and probably never published.

Raising Boys Without Men is a clear indicator of the lengths to which the feminist movement is willing to push its radical vision. The ultimate realization of this vision really comes down to the last two words of this book's title—*without men*.

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