

• *Introduction* •



■ don't understand men.

I don't even understand what I don't understand about men.

They're a most inscrutable bunch, really.

I had a moment of dazzling clarity when I was twenty-seven, a rush of confidence that I had cracked the code. But it was, alas, an illusion.

I think I overcomplicated their simplicity. Or oversimplified their simplicity. Are they as complicated as a pile of wood? Or as simple as a squid?

I was loath to accept the premise of Jerry Seinfeld, who claims that "men are really nothing more than extremely advanced dogs" who want the same thing from their women that

A R E M E N N E C E S S A R Y ?

they want from their underwear: “A little bit of support and a little bit of freedom.”

I was more prone to go with the thesis of James Thurber and E. B. White in their seminal 1929 treatise, *Is Sex Necessary?*, that the American male was the least understood of all male animals, and that more attention needed to be paid to his complexity—“the importance of what he is thinking about and what he intends to do, or at least what he would like to do. . . .

“How often do you hear it said that the little whims and desires of a man should be cherished, or even listened to? You don’t hear it said at all. What you do hear is that ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.’ A thing like that hardens a man. He may eat his spinach and say nothing, but he is being hardened just the same.”

Thurber and White don’t date the start of the troubles between men and women to the snaky Eve.

They contend that things got bollixed up in the 1920s, when the female, “face-to-face with the male’s simple desire to sit down and hold her” (aka “the attack of the male”), retaliated with irritating Diversion Subterfuges—such as Fudge Making and Indoor Games for groups—meant to fend off and put Man in his place.

“The American male’s repugnance to charades, which is equaled, perhaps, by his repugnance to nothing at all, goes back to those years,” the authors explained.

I know women are disorienting to men, too.

In his memoir about *The New Yorker*, *The Years with Ross*,

M A U R E E N D O W D

Thurber tells this story from the early '30s about the legendary editor's reaction to having a baby girl:

“One morning, I found Ross, worried and stoop-shouldered, pacing a corridor, jingling those pocket coins. He came right out with his current anxiety. ‘Goddamn it, I can’t think of any *man* that has a daughter. I think of men as having boys, and women as having girls.’

“ ‘I have a daughter,’ I said, ‘and I wanted a daughter.’

“ ‘That’s not natural, is it?’ he demanded. ‘I never heard of a man that didn’t want a son. Can you name any, well, you know, goddamn it—terribly masculine men with daughters?’

“The sun and moon of reassurance shone in his face when I came up with ‘Jack Dempsey has two children, both girls.’ His day was saved from the wreckage of despair, but he still had one final depressed word. ‘Goddamn it, I hate the idea of going around with female hormones in me.’ ”

In the final analysis, Thurber and White decided matters went irretrievably awry during the Jazz Age when flappers began to imitate men, smoking, drinking, wanting to earn money (“not much, but some”) and thinking they had “the right to be sexual.” All these strained attempts at equality, they contend, destroyed the mystery of the sexual tango, or sexual Charleston, if you will.

This spurt of cocky independence faded, and over the decades women lapsed back into domesticity and deference, until their only avatars were perfect gingham moms such as Donna Reed, June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson.

Then came the Sexual Revolution. When I entered college,

A R E M E N N E C E S S A R Y ?

in 1969, women were bursting out of their '50s chrysalis. The Jazz Age spirit flared in the Age of Aquarius. Women were once again imitating men and acting all independent: smoking, drinking, wanting to earn money (not as much, but some) and thinking the Pill gave them "the right to be sexual."

I didn't fit in with the brazen new world of hard-charging feminists. I was more of a fun-loving (if chaste) Carrie Bradshaw type, a breed that wouldn't come into vogue for several more decades.

I hated the dirty, unisex jeans and no-makeup look and drugs that zoned you out, and I couldn't understand the appeal of dances that didn't involve touching your partner.

In the universe of Eros, I longed for style and wit. I loved the Art Deco glamour of '30s movies. I wanted to dance the Continental like Fred and Ginger in white hotel suites; drink martinis like Myrna Loy and William Powell; live the life of a screwball heroine like Katharine Hepburn, wearing a gold lamé gown cut on the bias, cavorting with Cary Grant, strolling along Fifth Avenue with my pet leopard.

My mom would just shake her head and tell me that my idea of the '30s was wildly romanticized. "We were poor," she'd say. "We didn't dance around in white hotel suites."

I took the idealism and passion of the '60s for granted, simply assuming we were sailing toward perfect equality with men, a utopian world at home and at work.

I didn't listen to my mom when she advised me to get a suitcase with wheels before my first trip to Europe. I didn't listen to her before my first cocktail party, when she told me that men prefer homemade dinner rolls stuffed with turkey and ham to

M A U R E E N D O W D

expensive catered goose pâté and exotic cheese wheels. “Simplicity pays,” she said smugly, when all the guys swarmed around her sandwiches.

And I didn’t listen to her when she cautioned me about the chimera of equality.

On my thirty-first birthday, she sent me a bankbook with a modest nest egg she had saved for me. “I always felt that the girls in a family should get a little more than the boys even though all are equally loved,” she wrote in a letter. “They need a little cushion to fall back on. Women can stand on the Empire State Building and scream to the heavens that they are equal to men and liberated, but until they have the same anatomy, it’s a lie. It’s more of a man’s world today than ever. Men can eat their cake in unlimited bakeries.”

I thought she was just being Old World, like my favorite jade, Dorothy Parker, when she wrote:

By the time you’re his,
Shivering and sighing,
And he vows his passion is
Infinite, undying—
Lady, make a note of this:
One of you is lying.

I thought the struggle for egalitarianism was a cinch, so I could leave it to my earnest sisters in black turtlenecks and Birkenstocks. I figured there was plenty of time for me to get serious later, that America would always be full of passionate and full-throated debate about the big stuff—social issues,

A R E M E N N E C E S S A R Y ?

sexual equality, civil rights—rather than tinny right-left food fights and shrieking conservative babes with blond hair, long legs and miniskirts going on TV to trash women and women's rights.

No Cassandra, I.

Little did I realize that the sexual revolution would have the unexpected consequence of intensifying the confusion between the sexes, leaving women in a tangle of dependence and independence as they entered the twenty-first century. The fewer the barriers, the more muddied the waters. It never occurred to me that the more women aped men, in everything from dress to orgasms, the more we would realize how inalienably different the sexes are.

Or, most curious of all, that women would move from playing with Barbie to denouncing Barbie to remaking themselves as Barbie.

Maybe we should have known that the story of women's progress would be more of a zigzag than a superhighway, that the triumph of feminism would last a nanosecond while the backlash lasted forty years.

And that all the triumphant moments of feminism—from the selection of Geraldine Ferraro to the Anita Hill hearings to the co-presidency of buy-one-get-one-free First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton—would unleash negative reactions toward women.

Despite the best efforts of philosophers, politicians, historians, novelists, screenwriters, linguists, therapists, anthropologists and facilitators, men and women are still in a muddle in the boardroom, the Situation Room and the bedroom.

MAUREEN DOWD

At the risk of raising the question Am I necessary?, I admit I have no answers. But for decades now I've loved asking the questions. This book is not a systematic inquiry of any kind, or a handy little volume of sterling solutions to the American woman's problems. I possess no special wisdom about redemption in matters of sex and love. I am not peddling a theory or a slogan or a policy. I'm always as baffled as the next woman.

As Dinah Brand, the hard-boiled, mercenary dame in Dashiell Hammett's 1929 novel *Red Harvest*, complained, "I used to think I knew men, but, by God! I don't. They're lunatics, all of them."

I certainly understand if some men prefer to think of themselves as individuals and opt to wriggle out of one broad's broad generalizations.

This book offers only the diligent notes—on the job and off—of a fascinated observer of our gender perplexities.

And what a spectacle gender in America is!

The entanglements between men and women come in three forms: tragedies, comedies and tragicomedies. Outrage regularly alternates with silliness. Illusions are often more interesting than realities. Causes and desires are regularly mixed up. Will there ever be peace? I doubt it. But there should always be laughter.

My mom, a soft touch who loved men, suggested that I change my title to *Why Men Are Necessary*. "Men are necessary for breeding and heavy lifting," she said wryly.

But, difficult as it is, we must face up to the tough questions. As a species, it's possible that men are ever so last century. Are they any longer necessary for procreation? Have they proven

A R E M E N N E C E S S A R Y ?

themselves emotionally incapable of governing the country because they are really the ones subject to hissy fits and hormonal imbalances? Is their pillaging and plundering, war-mongering, empire-building Y chromosome melting faster than the Wicked Witch of the West? Is it time to dispense with all those oxygen-depleting men batting out opinions in newspapers, TV and blogs, and those computer-generated-looking male anchor clones on network news?

And what about women? Are we regressing? Or advancing along the winding scenic route in ways we hadn't predicted? I'm continually astonished, provoked and flummoxed by the odd and stunning trajectory men and women have traveled from the big bang of the Sexual Revolution to the big busts of the Plastic Revolution.

The free-love idea that sex could be casual and safe and un-fraught was, in retrospect, chuckleheaded. As my friend Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor for *The New Republic*, observes: "Sex is a spiritual obligation. It makes up for the poverty of bourgeois experience. We're too late for the Spanish Civil War. We missed the landing at Omaha Beach. But still we need to know what we're capable of. So it is in the realm of private life that we have to risk ourselves, to disclose ourselves, to vindicate ourselves; and the more private, the more illuminating. Our theater of self-discovery is smaller. And in this lucky but shrunken theater, the bedroom looms very large. It is the front line, the foxhole.

"The bedroom is where people who live otherwise safe lives can learn how cowardly or courageous they are, what their deepest and most dangerous desires are, whether they can fol-

M A U R E E N D O W D

low the unreason within them to what it, too, can teach. Tolstoy said that modern tragedy should be set in the bedroom.”

If Gloria Steinem had had a crystal ball and flashed forward to a 2005 filled with catfights and women scheming to trap men, snag the coveted honorific “Mrs.,” get cosmetic procedures to look like Playmate bombshells and dress, as Dave Chappelle says, like “whores,” would the sister have even bothered to lead that bonfire of the bras?

I think not.

Whether or not American feminism will be defeated by American conservatism, it is incontrovertibly true that American feminism was trumped by American narcissism.

This is a season when the female beau ideal is not Gloria Steinem, a serious bunny, but Jessica Simpson, a simple bunny, and when Hollywood’s remake of *The Stepford Wives* stumbled because it was no longer satire but documentary.

I had to live through disco, pointy polyester shirt collars, greed is good, me decade, yuppie consumerism and cigar bars—coming full circle from platform shoes and Diane von Furstenberg wrap dresses to platform shoes and Diane von Furstenberg wrap dresses—before I was hit with a pang of nostalgia for the opportunity I’d missed in college.

We would never again be so consumed with changing the world. The more time passed, the more Americans simply focused on changing themselves. We’ve become a nation of Frankensteins, and our monster is us. With everyone working so hard at altering their facades, we no longer have natural selection. We have unnatural selection.

Emma Woodhouse learned the hard way about the dangers

A R E M E N N E C E S S A R Y ?

of makeovers. She tried to turn her simple friend, Harriet Smith, into a girl with airs and aspirations. Too late, Jane Austen's heroine realized that she had altered Harriet for the worse, from humble to vain. Literature is rife with cautionary tales about experiments in identity—from Dorian Gray to Jay Gatsby to Tom Ripley, whose murderous motto was: "Better a fake somebody than a real nobody."

But our contemporary carnival of makeovers does not concern itself with virtue, only vanity. We have grown superficial even about surfaces. The whole country seems to have embraced Oscar Wilde's teaching that "It is only the shallow who do not judge by appearance." The national obsession with appearance is a chronicle of social psychosis straight out of Philip K. Dick.

We had the Belle Epoque. Now we have the Botox Epoch, permeated by plastic emotions from antidepressants and plastic veneers from collagen, silicone, cosmetic surgery and Botox. This, freedom?

I came of age in interlocking male institutions: My dad was a police detective, I was in the Catholic Church and I had three brothers. The nation's capital we lived in was peppered with statues honoring men. When I first got into journalism, I covered sports, then politics, at a time when they were even more male-dominated arenas.

Along the way, I got into the habit of tweaking the oppressors. I imagined that women were forever destined to a life of dissidence.

Though the science is mainly of metaphorical interest to me—a fascinating biological parable—the new research into sex chromosomes suggests that all that antler crashing over

M A U R E E N D O W D

the centuries has tuckered out the Y. Men are now the weaker sex, geneticists say, and could soon disappear altogether—taking March Madness and cold pizza in the morning with them.

Only another hundred thousand years—or ten million, if you believe the Y optimists—and the male chromosome could go the way of the dial-up connection.

So, dear readers of the soon-to-be-extinct male persuasion, you're on notice.

In the year 102,005, or 10,002,005 at the latest, we'll finally have our fair share of female network anchors, female priests, female columnists, female Supreme Court justices, corrupt female CEOs and philandering female presidents.

And we'll run the world.

In a manly way, of course.