

# Caitlin Moran

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women-translator, guy-empowerer'

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## what about men?

'It's magnificent'

**Bob Mortimer**

'Our greatest modern writer on  
women turns her eyes on men –  
and it's all good'

**David Baddiel**



## About the Author

**Caitlin Moran** is the multi-award winning million-selling author of *How to Be A Woman*, which has been published in over 30 countries, and named as one of the *Sunday Times*' Most Influential Books of the 2000s. The 2020 sequel, *More Than A Woman*, was also a Number One bestseller.

Caitlin Moran's novels, *How To Build A Girl* and *How To Be Famous*, went to Number One, and she adapted *How To Build A Girl* into a 2020 movie starring Beanie Feldstein, and Emma Thompson. Her Channel 4 sitcom, *Raised By Wolves*, co-written with her sister Caroline Moran, won a Rose d'Or for Comedy.

Her columns in *The Times* have won her Columnist of the Year seven times, and actually she's won loads of other stuff as well, but she's aware this is just all looking like insecure boasting, and also she's knackered from having written this book, so she's just going to stop now. But she also makes amazing macaroni cheese.

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# WHAT ABOUT MEN?

**CAITLIN MORAN**

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*To my husband, Pete, who let me rinse all his boyhood experiences for this book, despite the fact he'd written about them with far more élan in his memoir, Broken Greek: £9.99, Quercus, Radio 4's Book of the Week, 'Lip-lickingly, dance-around-the-living-room good', Observer.*

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# Introduction to the Paperback Edition

I've never had to write a new introduction to a book before. But then, I've never written a book as controversial as *What About Men?*

How controversial was it? Well, let's put it into perspective. It wasn't as controversial as, say, Adele losing weight – which was one of the most seismic global events of the last ten years. She let big women down! But it was for her health! *Or was it???*

Also, *What About Men?* went straight into the charts at number one on publication, and I was able to buy myself a nice new kitchen table, so – it's all swings and roundabouts, controversy-wise.

However, the controversy in certain quarters was still controversial enough for me to have to shut down my social

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media for a month, because the levels of abuse were, to use the scientific term, ‘ensaddening’.

‘Wow – people are so *angry*,’ I thought, as I closed the laptop.

I’d been making a boiled egg for breakfast – and in the time it took for the white to set, but the yolk still be dip-ably runny, I’d been called a ‘fat, Feminazi lesbian’ six times. Luckily for me, some of my favourite people are fat, Feminazi lesbians, so I could take it as a compliment; but, still. All the shouting put a momentary downer on breakfast.

Then, when the reviews came out, a number of them *also* believed this book was somehow . . . controversial.

There’s no fun in quoting from the good reviews – of which, I must point out, there were plenty. All the amusement comes from stuff like, ‘stupid’, ‘patronising and glib’, ‘grandiose *and* naive’, and ‘Has Caitlin Moran ever *met* a man?’.

My favourite criticism regarded the chapter on teenage boys’ body image and the massive, generational rise in body dysmorphia. I had detailed how unrealistic, and even dangerous, becoming as ripped as Mark Wahlberg, or a movie superhero, is: the 3.30am workouts, the mad diets, the steroids, the pain. Wahlberg rises at 2.30am every day, and works out *three times* – including a spell in a cryogenic chamber – and yet, he is *still not the most ripped man in Hollywood*. Presumably, to be that, you must rise at 1.30am, and work-out *four* times.

And, as the Marvel director I interviewed revealed, on the days where the actors have to be copless, they drink

nothing all day – for it is only when they are profoundly dehydrated that they get the kind of muscle tone we see presented as ‘normal’ on the big screen.

The purpose of the chapter was to comfort teenage boys: look! Even those whose literal, paid job it is to be this ripped, and hench, don’t look like they look in the movies. You’re being sold the same kind of unachievable bullshit women have been sold for decades.

However, according to one review, quoting Wahlberg’s schedule was a mistake. What I *really* should have done was give dysmorphia sufferers the lifestyle advice of . . . Marcel Proust, instead.

‘How refreshing it would have been for Moran to cut and paste Proust’s Questionnaire?’ the writer suggested, airily – throwing into the mix Proust’s famous boilerplate quiz for getting to know someone. Although perhaps forgetting that, in Proust’s own replies to this questionnaire, Marcel suggests that the secret to happiness is ‘to have, within easy distance, a French theatre’, confesses he wishes he was ‘Pliny the Younger’, and problematically lists as his favourite quality in a woman, ‘Manly virtues.’

Although a big fan of Proust myself, I would be interested to see how these hints, tips and admissions went down at the local PureGym in Wolverhampton. Particularly the bit about Pliny the Younger. While *all* writers would love to believe that the solution to the worlds’ problems is to ‘read French memoirists’, I’m not sure that all twenty-first century teenage boys ail from is nothing but a lack of Proust.

Anyway, mad detour into Proust aside, the gist from the bad reviews was, basically, that this book is essentially

unnecessary, and that it was borderline offensive to ask the question, *What About Men?*

Tellingly, the outcry started as soon as news of the book was announced – before anyone had read it. At that point, all I had done was post on X: ‘After years of writing about women, I have a new book, *What About Men?* In it, I ask: Is it, these days, harder to be a man than a woman? After all, women are always talking about their problems – that’s feminism! – so it seems like it might be the men’s turn, now.’

The response to this ostensibly mild suggestion rapidly coalesced into two, equally furious, but entertainingly opposite, camps, thus:

GROUP ONE, primarily left-wing liberals: ‘Caitlin Moran has written a book in which she suggests men’s problems are because they *can’t* talk about their problems, anxieties and emotions. This is a hopelessly outdated, insulting depiction of men – modern men are *incredibly* emotionally literate! *I* suffer from *none* of these problems! – and, therefore, this book is shit. And – what about Proust? You have disappointed us, Caitlin Moran.

or:

GROUP TWO, primarily right-wing conservatives: ‘Caitlin Moran has written a book in which she suggests men have problems talking about their problems, anxieties and emotions. But! Men aren’t biologically *wired* to talk about their problems, anxieties and emotions – modern society is just trying to

make us talk like *women*. Any boy or man suffering from any of the problems in this book is a *pussy*. And therefore, this book is shit. You have disappointed us, Caitlin Moran!’

Of course, the tragedy of modern discourse is that it often happens in a variety of silos – and so the men in Group One had no idea that they believed the absolute opposite of the guys in Group Two, and vice versa. But both were bracingly confident that they were representing All Men.

As the only person in the middle of all this – able to see both opposing tribes of men as they shouted at me, but were seemingly wholly unaware of each other – I longed to suggest a dinner party where they got together and hashed out these crucial questions: *is* there a crisis in masculinity? If there is, is the solution *more* masculinity – or less? Wouldn’t men properly debating these fundamental beliefs be the start of *exactly* the kind of new Men’s Movement that *What About Men?* was suggesting in the first place?

And how much of this reaction from two disparate camps came down, in the end, to straight men being *startled* that they were being now written about as just another class of person, in the same way women, LGBT folks, and people of colour are so used to being written about?

After all, wise old Simone de Beauvoir had noted, ‘A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male’ in *The Second Sex*, back in 1949. We are simply not used to asking the question, ‘What is a man?’ in the way we constantly ask ‘What is a woman?’ I have seen precisely *what* has happened on what the

word ‘man’ means. We just . . . know. No-one ever defines it. They are The First Sex. It’s kind of . . . rude to try.

I wondered if men were alarmed that some kind of cheerful, titty David Attenborough – me – had rocked up, and started doing a whispery voiceover describing their anxieties, conversations, mating-habits and trousers? All, of course, in the fond, fascinated way Sir David does when in the vicinity of a marmoset.

But, as all the controversy raged, I had a weird feeling of familiarity. There was something in the tone that I knew I had experienced before. Either denying there was a problem at all, or else, arguing that, if there *was* a problem, the affected people simply needed to *toughen up*. I recognised this instantly stubborn tone.

And then I knew where I’d encountered it before. When my teenage daughter first became ill, with an eating disorder – it was *me*. I had this stubborn tone.

When her illness started, I too oscillated between two thoughts: either that, because *I* didn’t have a problem with food, or my body, there was no way *she* could – that there was no problem here at all.

Or, alternately, that she had simply *given in* to some modern-malaise of self-loathing – probably learned off ‘the internet’ – and should just be sensible, and strong, and *buck up*. Like me.

Meanwhile, she kept being miserable, and anxious, and not eating. She kept presenting me with evidence that, no, she *wasn’t* fine and, no, *bucking up* wasn’t possible, and, that whatever *I* thought or believed, it didn’t actually have any relevance to *her* problems at all. Until, finally – in our

last, awful visit to A&E – I had to admit, overwhelmed by all the evidence: yes. There is a problem here.

She was ringing all the alarm bells, and I finally needed to sit down with her and work out *why*.

Well, there are alarm bells ringing with boys, and men too, and they have been ringing for some time, now. And if those alarm bells aren't being rung by *all* men and boys, it doesn't alter the fact they are ringing, and they are *loud*.

There is a sobering list of stats which apply overwhelmingly to men and boys. Boys are more likely to be medicated at school for disruptive behaviour, more likely to be excluded from school, less likely to go on to further education, and more likely to become addicted to alcohol, drugs or pornography. They're more likely to join gangs, more likely to be involved in violence, and more likely to get a criminal record. They make up the vast majority of the UK prison population (96 per cent) and the vast majority of the UK homeless population (83 per cent). One in five men over the age of fifty say they have no close friends; suicide is the leading cause of death for men under fifty.

This paints a picture of boys and men often struggling to fit into existing systems. Obviously, many men are simply doing fine – they have normal, steady lives, and weather their adversities with equanimity. But, within those stats, there are millions of boys and men who, when they hit a problem with what could be a relatively manageable situation – where it's to do with school or work, drinking, sex, poor mental health, divorce – are far more apt to begin a slide towards an extreme outcome.

And I can't help but conclude this is because they either

have problems asking for help – or because there is no help available for them in the first place. That there is no cohesive men’s movement, with specific aims and solutions, in the way there is for women. No equivalent of #MeToo, or UN Women, or the Minister for Women.

Since this book was first published last year – to reviews suggesting that modern men don’t need help – I have kept count of the stories, in the news-sections of the same newspapers, which suggest that they do.

In Britain, there has been an 81 per cent rise in sexual assaults in schools in the UK - the vast majority committed by boys, against girls. 26 per cent of these are on children under the age of ten.

The latest survey on pornography-viewing in the UK revealed that the average age children first watched pornography was 12, with the youngest viewing it at the age of 3. 13 per cent of boys – more than one in ten – described themselves as ‘addicted’ to porn.

Worldwide, over 20 million men have now downloaded Replika – a virtual, AI ‘romantic’ female partner. For whatever reasons, 20 million men feel they can’t have a relationship with a human being of the opposite sex, and prefer to have . . . an imaginary partner.

Possibly explaining why men are finding it hard to get on with women in real life, a new report showed an unexpected trend among adults under thirty, which academics are calling ‘gendered ideological polarisation’. As *The Times* reported, ‘From South Korea to Spain, young women increasingly support liberal political parties, whilst their male peers are more likely to vote conservative’. Across the world, there is now a

massive, unprecedented 30 per cent divergence between men and women in terms of core political beliefs.

Dovetailing into this was the report, published in January 2024 by The Policy Institute at King's College London and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, which revealed a quarter of British males aged between 16 and 29 now believe it's harder to be a man than a woman. They are also more likely than their Boomer parents to believe 'feminism does more harm than good'.

Meanwhile, the number of 'economically inactive' young men has doubled in the last decade, with the main explanation cited as 'poor mental health'. Knife crime – which almost exclusively involves young men – continues to rise, and by as much as 20 per cent within a single year in London. Meanwhile, America saw an 8 per cent rise in mass shootings – to 604 in 2023. All but one were carried out by a man.

In my own life, two chapters in this book have taken on unbearable resonance since publication. Chapter 13, *The Illnesses of Men, or: Why Won't Men Go To The Doctor?* explains all the reasons, big and small, why men fear, delay or outright avoid medical check-ups. Factors which could so easily be addressed with slight changes in how we provide medical care and talk about men's health. Since June 2023, two men in my social group have died, very suddenly, of underlying heart conditions. Heart conditions which could have been picked up – if they had gone to the doctor.

And two men – one 23, the other 52 – have taken their own lives. No one saw it coming. They never indicated they were struggling. Not a single person in their friendship group had the faintest idea they were feeling so desperate.

I recalled the review of *What About Men?* which imagined the writer and his male friends – ‘engaged in desultory chit-chat or playing video games’ – ‘being asked to talk about our problems.’

‘I imagined the silence and embarrassment and thought: has Caitlin Moran ever met a man?’ the reviewer wrote.

I then re-read the chapter *The Friendships of Men*, and the quote from one man I interviewed: ‘I’ve spent whole evenings in the pub, feeling genuinely suicidal – and never mentioned it.’

In Sweden, the problem with boys and men is so widely recognised it’s been named: *pojkkrisen*, or ‘boy crisis’.

In Britain, and America, the boy crisis has no name. But it is there. On the news-pages, every day.

But when I went around the UK to promote the book, I found there were plenty of other people who recognised there was a crisis too. Night after night, people would queue for two or three hours, to talk, and get their books signed – and many of those I met were teachers. Teachers desperate to talk about what they’d seen in their schools. Revenge porn and sexual assault were big topics, but the biggest was the impact Andrew Tate had made on young boys.

‘We have girls who refuse to come into lessons because the boys will be shouting Tate’s slogans and catchphrases. I’ve had female teachers reduced to tears,’ one said.

Teachers, of course, have the unique vantage point of being able to observe decades of changing child behaviour. Unlike parents – who only experience the weather during

their own, relatively brief, boat trip through parenthood. And they were all certain of one thing: things weren't this bad ten years ago. Something quite seismic had changed for Gen Z and Gen A boys.

'They're taking up a lot of bandwidth,' one sighed. Others detailed the amounts of school time being taken up with either disciplining Tate fans, mediating between groups of girls and boys at war over his teachings, or organising parent-teacher assemblies – to inform bewildered parents, ignorant of Tate, about the impact he was having on their children.

'The only relief is that they tend to grow out of him by the time they're 14 or 15,' one teacher said, who was clutching a glass of wine like it was a lifeline. 'The bigger boys will tease the younger Tate-fans that he's a bit of a creepy loser. One pointed out that he looks like a cruise-ship magician – which was pretty hard to argue with.'

It was also on tour that I had one of my biggest questions answered: why hadn't *What About Men?* been written *by a man*? Bookshops are awash with books about women's problems, and lives: if you have a teenage daughter looking for some humorous guidance through periods, fashion, sex, friendship, love, motherhood and into old age, there are dozens of cheerful, honest memoirs and self-help books you can leave on her bedside table, next to some Feminax, and a Kit-Kat.

For teenage boys? Well, there aren't many chuckles or fashion tips in Jordan B Peterson – and he *will* tell you you're a lobster. Grayson Perry's *The Descent of Man* is simply wonderful, both Laura Bates' *Men Who Hate Women* and Peggy Orenstein's *Boys & Sex* are full of truly

enlightening, if sobering, research, and Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Camille Paglia and others have been debating these things for years, if not decades.

But, as I note in the book, whilst every bookshop has a ‘Women’ section, there is no ‘Men’ section. Books about men are dwarfed by the deluge of books about women. And, because there are still so few, there isn’t the sense of a galloping, fun, unfolding *conversation* about boys, and men, in the way there is for girls and women. Writing about masculinity is still, by and large, a serious subject, undertaken by academics: these aren’t books that start conversations in pubs, or skate-parks. So I wanted to write the kind of book that was about serious subjects, but which basically worked as a series of stand-up routines, from a female observer, asking why Men’s Issues seem to have got pushed down the Societal ‘To Discuss’ List until it resided somewhere between ‘The Orkney Islands considering joining Norway’ and ‘Recycling Bins.’

I was soon given an answer. And it wasn’t one I expected.

‘You ask why a man hasn’t written a book like this,’ a man in the audience said, on the second night of the tour. ‘But how could he? Can you imagine a *man* saying “What about men? Pay us attention! It’s *our* turn now!” We’d be torn to bits. By women. It *had* to be a woman who said it first.’

And there was a loud rumble of agreement from the audience.

I’m not often genuinely lost for words – I can usually pop out something about dogs, or Elizabeth Taylor – but this did properly stop me in my tracks. I hadn’t realised that

feminism had done such a bang-up job of talking about male privilege, and women needing to have control of the microphone for a while, that it had actually made men now feel it was either impolite, sexist, or *risky* to talk about the statistically evident problems in their lives.

That there was a fear of ridicule, or anger – *from women*.

Maybe this – the fear of mansplaining – was the root of that quarter of all British men under the age of 25 saying, ‘it’s easier to be a man than a woman now.’ That the familiar chant of female problems – helpfully reproduced in one of the reviews - of ‘rape, underpaying, genital mutilation, [and] harassment both at work and on the street’, has now made men fear being somehow *boorish* if they reply with ‘exclusion, addiction, prison, homelessness, knife-crime, suicide’.

But of course, unhappiness isn’t a First Past the Post contest. As someone whose Instagram bio is ‘In the Culture Wars, I’d like to be the bit on Christmas Day where both sides played football’, I’ve ended up writing books about both woman *and* men because there *are* no sides, in the end: men and women are each others’ mothers, brothers, fathers, sisters, friends, lovers, crushes, heroes, and frenemies you just can’t quit. The problems of women swiftly become the problems of men, and vice-versa. We are all interconnected. However well you feel *you* are doing, the Culture Wars *will* end up sitting around your table, on Christmas Day, or calling you at 2am, sobbing, or marrying your daughter.

And as one amused woman in the audience pointed out, on tour, ‘All the men who say they don’t see themselves

reflected in this book? I suspect a lot of their wives, or mothers, or work colleagues, do.’

And it received the biggest, and most knowing, laugh of the night.

Of course, when it comes to the pockets of controversy around this book, there’s always the temptation to go Full Father Ted – in the episode when decides to use an after-dinner speech to pettily lambast everyone who’s ever doubted or wronged him. ‘And now – *the liars!*’

Or to Do A Nabokov – in the second edition of *Lolita*, Nabokov published his *own* review of the book, primarily to point out all the things that Kingsley Amis had got wrong in *his* review.

I am a fond admirer of that level of peevishness. I think that level of enjoyable, self-righteous, flamboyant score-settling is one of the things men do best. I am a genuine fan of the art. As you can probably tell.

But that would be to suggest that I believe this *is* a controversial book: that I wrote it in the spirit of battle; and that what you are about to read is an excoriating blend of either feminist rage, or patronising pity, directed at the XY chromosome, by someone who is a confidently self-declared expert on masculinity.

Whereas I’m reasonably sure it’s actually a very fond pub chat, by an enthusiastic amateur, aimed at scared teenage boys, tired dads, husbands confused by their wives, divorcees puzzled by the implosion of their social lives, middle-aged men hurt that just ‘buying a motorbike’ is seen as an hilarious mid-life crisis, and men with a weird pain when they run  
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The title is a question because, if men and boys really *are* worried that voicing their anxieties will prompt ‘silence and embarrassment’ from other men, and anger from women, then we need to ask: do men need to change how they talk? Or do we need to change how we listen?

What is it about men that makes honesty, in 2024, so . . . well, okay. I’ll say it. I give in. *Controversial?*

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# Prologue: What About Men?

‘Errrr . . .’

It’s July 2014, and I’ve just been asked a question I can’t answer.

Normally, I would like to think there are no questions I cannot answer. I am on a speaking tour for *How to Be a Woman*, and all the questions the audience ask are about women, and girls.

As someone with, at the time, 38 years of experience of being either a woman, or a girl, I’ve some chat about pretty much All The Women Things: bloodied pants; comfort-eating; the pay gap; abortion; Beyoncé. When it comes to the vag-based problems, I have the bantz.

Right now, however, I’m onstage in front of 1,198 people, and the silence after the question is getting longer, and more uncomfortable. Because while the first two questions were

‘Can feminists wear pink?’ (‘Yes!’) and ‘What do you think of Paris trying to ban the burka?’ (‘Obviously, women should be allowed to wear whatever they *want* to wear. However, until there is a burka for *men*, we can see the *fundamental* idea is sexist bullshit’), the third question has stumped me.

The woman in the audience, holding the microphone, has just asked: ‘So – do you have any advice for *men*?’

This is the first time I have ever been asked this question. I’ll be honest: I feel a bit annoyed by it. Why *this* topic? I’m a feminist! My specialist subject is women! I don’t do . . . the other guys. You might as well ask e.g. Sir David Attenborough a question about the Swindon gyratory system! That’s not his patch! Men aren’t mine!

I decide I’ll make a joke about it. I’ll play to the crowd. This room is dominated by women – earlier, I’d asked all the ‘brave men’ in the room to raise their hands, so we could see them; so I know there are 1,152 women here, and 46 men. I’ll just play to a cheap yet effective stereotype, and move this question on.

‘My advice to men? I guess, a) please, if you can possibly avoid it, don’t rape us, and b) put the bowls in the dishwasher – rather than *next* to the dishwasher?’

It gets a laugh – the kind of bittersweet laugh you get from a room full of women who are familiar with the idea of spending 20 minutes discussing both the complete collapse in rape convictions in the UK, *and* housework.

I add a cheerful ‘Hashtag #notallmen’ – to let the men in the audience know this isn’t an attack on them. Just the Bad Men out there. The small number of Bad Men. Then we move the conversation on.

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I'm still a bit peeved. Men, though? Ugh. Why were we talking about men? I've spent the last ten years researching how shit things are for women around the world. Honestly, by comparison, the men are *fine*.

Two nights later, and I'm in a similar jam. I'm now in Edinburgh, still doing an hour of chat about women, and girls – but, yet again, when the audience start asking questions, the second question I get asked is: 'What advice would you give to the mothers of teenage boys?'

Urgh. Come now! I'm the Woman Woman! Why are you asking me this? Are people purposely trying to ask me difficult questions?

Now I know how Paul McCartney felt when I interviewed him, and asked him what he'd do if he were in a car crash that totally destroyed his face. 'So, Sir Paul – would you use plastic surgery to build back the face of Paul McCartney? Or would you choose *another* face? So you could live the rest of your life in pleasant anonymity?'

I thought I was honouring him with a tricky, yet clever, inquiry. Instead, he treated it like a joke – 'I'd get the face of David Cameron, instead' – indicated that this had been my final question, and terminated the interview.

Unfortunately, this is not my final question.

'It's just, I have a teenage girl, and there seems to be loads of advice for mothering a girl,' the woman in the audience continues. 'That's why I read your book. But I also have a son, and for him – I can find nothing. I just wondered if you had any advice for women trying to

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raise . . . ? and here her voice falters for a minute, ‘. . . *good*, happy boys, and men?’

‘Well, obviously, I have no experience of raising boys – I have two girls,’ I start. ‘But I guess my question – and it’s to all of us here – is: why should this be the women’s problem? Interestingly, this is the second time this week I’ve been asked about men – and both times, it was a *woman* asking me. But why is this a question for feminism? Feminism is the only socio-political invention dedicated solely to helping women. It would be ironic, would it not, if women – having spent the last hundred years knackered themselves trying to solve the problems of women – now had to go and solve all the problems of men, as well?’

It’s getting some laughs, so I keep going: ‘They need to solve their own problems! They’re the best-qualified people to do so! Why are men not asking other *men* this question? Your husband should be asking, I don’t know, *Gary Lineker* this. Not me!’

For the rest of the tour, whenever I get asked about men – which I am, almost every night – this is basically the reply I give. It always gets a laugh. And I believe it. It wouldn’t be *fair* to make women solve the problems of men. Particularly *this* woman. I believe most men are good, lovely, kind, fun, decent, awesome human beings. I’m violently opposed to the branches of feminism that are permanently angry with men, or who just hate men on principle, or think men can’t be feminists. Of course they can! There are as many decent men as there are decent women! Men are awesome! I married one! All four Beatles were men! Men invented John Frieda Frizz Ease Serum! I am an absolute fan of men!

But, ultimately, if forced to pick a team, I'm Team Tits. Up the women! God bless them – but let the men sort *themselves* out.

For the next three years or so, this very much continues to be my stance. Indeed, in this, I am bolstered by being on Twitter, every March, on International Women's Day.

For, regular as clockwork, as soon as thousands of women start excitedly Tweeting about events, feminist heroes, feminist initiatives, charities and arts events, they are met by thousands of men Tweeting in return, peevishly, 'But when is International *Men's* Day? Huh? What about the *men*? No one cares about *men*. This is *sexist*.'

Year after year, in vain, the comedian Richard Herring would spend International Women's Day replying to each of these Tweets, patiently, with a simple fact: 'International Men's Day is 19 November. Maybe put on an event? Tweet about it then?'

But the effect is always the same: I become massively irritated about men stomping all over a women's thing, shouting, 'WHAT ABOUT US?'

What about you? Honestly? I don't *care*. Make your own things – don't piggyback on ours.

It's 2019 and I have changed. I am starting to care very much. Because now, it's not me that's being asked these questions about men.

It's my teenage daughters.

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I am currently on a Zoom call with one of my daughters, two of her girlfriends, and four of their male classmates. International Women's Day has rolled round, and we're supposed to be having a conversation about feminism – this is what I have been drafted in to chat about. My presumption was that Gen Z boys were the most liberal and feminist generation so far. I thought ideas about equality, and feminism, were so accepted among their teenage friends as to be almost passé. I thought this was going to be a straightforward bit of 'Up the women!'

That's not what I'm hearing on this Zoom call.

'It's harder to be a boy than a girl now,' Milo says, right at the beginning, blinking. 'Everything is stacked against boys.'

While the girls look outraged, all the boys nod.

'Feminism has gone too far,' George says. His certainty in saying this is . . . unexpected. This is a sentence I expect to hear from some angry, 50-something hard-right Republican on the campaign trail in the Midwest – not a middle-class 18-year-old boy at an arts college, wearing a Sonic Youth T-shirt.

I've told everyone that for the first half of this Zoom call, I only want the boys to speak. I want the boys to tell me what *their* problems are – what *they're* scared of. Before we start a conversation about feminism – the problems of girls – I wanted to let the boys talk first; so that they would be more prepared to listen. I wanted to engineer a friendly communal chat! Bring the sexes together! However, it is *not* going the way I thought it would.

'The girls talk about how scared they are of sexual

violence – but boys are *much* more likely to be attacked,’ Milo says. ‘That’s just a fact. Every day, I’m scared I’m going to be stabbed.’

‘Me too!’

‘Constantly.’

‘Like, we just expect it’s going to happen.’

‘Girls don’t have to worry about being stabbed, or getting into a fight,’ George says.

‘So you’re worried about violence from other boys, or men,’ I say, trying to find some common ground. ‘Well, you have that in common with the girls. They fear violent boys, and men, too.’

‘Yeah – but then we *also* have to be scared of the girls,’ Milo says.

The girls look outraged, but I gesture for them to just listen, for now.

‘Why are you scared of *girls*?’ I ask.

‘Well, there’s a *lot* of “he said, she said” stuff,’ George says, looking uncomfortable. ‘Rumours and gossip going around schools that such-and-such a boy has raped a girl – then it turns out they did have sex, but she just changed her mind, after, or wanted to get back at him. It gets nasty. Boys’ lives get ruined by it. A lot of boys are too scared to even talk to girls now – you don’t know how it’s going to be portrayed later. That’s what I mean when I say feminism has gone too far.’

‘Men are just seen as bad, or toxic. It’s always like, “What have the boys done now?” We’re blamed for everything. People just automatically presume we’re all rapists.’

‘We’re always the *young ones*.’

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‘And we’re told to talk about our problems or feelings, but when we do it’s like, “You’re whining,” or “You’re mansplaining, shut up,” or “Men don’t have problems, they’re *fine*. They’re always the winners” – but we’re not. It *is* easier to be a woman than a man now.’

‘That’s what Jordan B. Peterson says – that we talk about men like just actually being a man, just actually existing as a man, is wrong. That straight white men get blamed for everything. And then you look at how many young men are killing themselves, and you think: this is all fucked up. Who cares about the men?’

By this point in the conversation, I was starting to feel very uneasy. I could see how angry and misunderstood these boys felt – how much pent-up emotion they had.

I thanked everyone for being so honest. The boys seemed startled: ‘It’s been *amazing* to talk about this stuff. I haven’t really done it before.’

‘I’ve literally never had someone say, “What are the problems that boys have?” You only ever hear that asked about girls.’

They all, very politely but genuinely, thanked me, and said they really looked forward to the next chat.

After I stopped the Zoom, the girls immediately started texting me.

‘They were just being *polite* with you.’

‘On WhatsApp, they call feminism a “cancer”, and feminists “Feminazis”.’

‘They make rape jokes – they say it’s all banter, but it’s clearly never occurred to them that we know women who *have* been raped.’

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