

Review

Anastasia Salter & Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN: 978-3-319-66076-9 9 (pb). 214pp.

I've recently been rediscovering my love for old movies, stumbling on new finds and re-watching old favorites. An entry in the 'new find' category, *Bachelor Apartment* (1931), is a pre-code romantic comedy about sexual harassment in the workplace. The heroine, played by Irene Dunne, knows what she is getting herself into when she reluctantly accepts a secretarial job from a rich playboy. The film follows a fairly predictable trajectory in which powerful boy meets vulnerable girl, boy comes on to girl (repeatedly), girl rebuffs boy (repeatedly) until boy realizes that he's in love and sets out to win her heart.

This film is hardly an outlier. We've seen variations of this story play out across film and television for over a century with harassment and abuse (both psychological and physical) presented as acceptable, amusing, or as a path to the eventual happy ending. I love many of these movies, even as I am also hyper-aware of the ways in which I not only accept these narratives, but also embrace and applaud them. I've been amused. I've rooted for these couples to unite, or reunite, at the end. I *still* root for Katherine Hepburn to get back together with Cary Grant in *Philadelphia Story* (1940) despite the fact that he shoves her to the ground in the first scene of the film. (She did snap his favorite golf club in half, after all.)

That media such as films, television series, videogames, and comic books are created largely by (white) men and for (white) men is not a new observation. That it perpetuates unacceptable paradigms of male behavior toward women is also not a new observation. The #MeToo and #NeverAgain movements have certainly (re)focused our attention on the ineluctable circumstances that characterize the lives of many women, but they have not acquainted us with anything we didn't already know. In response to these collective movements women are speaking out, demanding that our voices be heard. To paraphrase Frances McDormand in her recent Academy Award acceptance speech, 'We've got some things to say'.

All of which makes some segments of the population uneasy. In the United States, Fox News is currently airing a multipart series of reports on 'Men in America' which suggests that men (read: straight white men) are under siege from culture and particularly those elements of culture that 'favor' women and immigrants. In Part One we are told that men are in trouble,

and no one is paying attention to their current plight. Relative to girls, men are failing in school, in the work force, at the very business of being men. 'Men are becoming less "male"', we are told, as measured by lower testosterone levels. The dominant cultural narrative, Tucker Carlson reminds us (as if the #MeToo movement had never happened), is that women are victims and men are oppressors. 'But it's not true', Carlson assures his audience that this is actually an 'outdated view of an America that no longer exists'. To support this claim, Carlson turns to Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychologist, academic, and creator of a series of YouTube videos criticizing political correctness. His Facebook page is a haven for people who bash feminism and fear the coming white genocide. Peterson asserts that the prevailing discussion of #MeToo and toxic masculinity is a 'witch hunt' and an 'organized attempt to deemphasize or punish masculinity'. Ultimately, Peterson advises parents to immediately remove their sons from any school that seeks to talk to them about 'equity, diversity, inclusivity, white privilege, systemic racism'.

Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media by Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett thus appears at a particularly salient moment, seeking to capture as it does the uneasy confluence of efforts to both correct past inequalities and to hang on to everything that past may represent. At its best this volume raises timely questions about the nature of the media we regularly consume and the effects, subtle and not so subtle, that it has on us. The authors also point out, quite rightly, that we ignore these trends in popular culture at our peril, connecting the dots between the rise of the so-called 'alt-right' and disaffection of young white males in geek communities. This is an important lesson. It is also a lesson often overshadowed by some of the volume's shortcomings.

Overall the book suffers from a lack of specificity, starting with the definitions of key terms. We are never really told what is meant by the term 'geek', though we are assured that both authors identify as geeks themselves. 'Nerd' and 'geek' are conflated and neither are adequately defined, or they are defined only by admittedly outdated online tests which were then, as now, intended to poke fun at the target community. Given that a large part of the authors' argument hinges on the fact that 'geek' culture has been increasingly mainstreamed (and perhaps this is part of why self-described geeks are feeling threatened), it would be useful to understand how geeks are defining themselves. This points to a larger methodological difficulty. As previously noted, it's not news that media perpetuates and reflects problematic cultural 'norms'. The authors miss the opportunity to more closely examine the communities they are arguing are affected by this media.

Similarly 'masculinity' as a concept is left somewhat fuzzy despite the breakdown into 'traditional masculinity' (equated with the jock stereotype), hypermasculinity (of the Rambo variety), and geek masculinity, which is here described as a response to being under attack for not being one of the other two types. More importantly, every version of masculinity offered is a toxic version, leaving the reader wondering if there are acceptable ways to be a male geek or even a male. Again, spending more time examining the community they seek to critique would have added both breadth and depth to the authors' claims.

In addition to ambiguous or non-existent definitions, broad generalizations are not supported with evidence. Some of these are (relatively) minor such as the authors' characterization of the Doctor in *Doctor Who* as 'largely presented within any episode as a jovial, goofy, or harmless person' (29). Others, such as the assertion that 'the dominance of the geek-aligned masculinity can be seen within the media of the nobility during the Enlightenment and Victorian eras' (35) certainly demand far more context than offered by the authors. In the same vein, certain references (such as those to Elliot Roger or 'Baby' in *Supernatural*) are not adequately explained. More thorough proofreading would have caught major difficulties, such as promising material in one chapter that was not delivered in the next on at least two occasions, as well as relatively minor proofreading problems, such as correctly spelling names throughout the text.

Ultimately the biggest frustrations of this book arise from its absences. In a book that looks so closely at a young straight white male demographic, there is little discussion of race as a parallel site of toxic behavior. Indeed, the subject seems to come up only once in the conclusion in connection with the boycott of *The Force Awakens* due to the lack of leading white men in the cast. This needs its own chapter at a minimum. And while the authors do give us a good accounting of the Gamergate debacle, they fail to give the same thorough attention to the 'fake geek girl' phenomenon and miss the opportunity to discuss the participation of women in the bashing of other women, relegating this fact to a parenthetical aside (104) rather than acknowledging that the toxicity they are discussing affects women as well as men, and not always in the ways we might assume. More broadly, this is another opportunity to assess the response of actual geeks on both sides of the gender divide. How did it affect the average female comics fan? What about male geeks who may have rejected Tony Harris' rant and all the assumptions that went with it? In the same vein, I would have like to have seen more detailed coverage of the 'Sad Puppies'/Hugo Awards imbroglio, which is only addressed in the conclusion (and which is more extensively examined in this journal issue).

Finally, there is the representation, or lack of representation of women, who are presented as largely helpless in the face of the onslaught of toxic masculinity (geek and otherwise). This simply isn't the case. For all the toxicity reflected in Gamergate, 'fake geek girl', and Sad Puppies, there was also defiance laced with a healthy dose of humor. Yes, the title references toxic *masculinity*, but there are women on the receiving end of this behavior (as well as women participating in this behavior) and to not hear from them is in some way continuing the attempted erasure of their presence in geekdom.

Back to Frances McDormand. Women have some things to say. The authors make a good case for why the male geek narrative has been so successful (and so insidious) with a certain subset of male fandom, but miss the opportunity to explore the ways at which the fandom at large, both men and women, are reading media texts and acting on their messages.

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