H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gary S. Cross. *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 316 pp. $29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14430-8; (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-51311-1.

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Published on H-Childhood (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan

Boy-Men, Pal Dads, and the New Culture of Immaturity

Today's celebrity culture overflows with examples of "boy-men"–men who live in a kind of perpetual adolescence, obsessed with retaining their youthful spirit and looks and never having outgrown juvenile pleasures and hobbies. Michael Jackson and Hugh Hefner, our contemporary culture's perhaps most iconic boy-men, took the role to extremes. Their elaborate estates Neverland Ranch and the Playboy Mansion stand as monuments to their refusal to grow up. Even our two most recent presidents failed miserably as public models of maturity–George Bush, with his smirking grin and penchant for cowboy diplomacy, and Bill Clinton, with his numerous sexual indiscretions. In today's society, however, men hardly need a fortune or the power of high office to extend adolescence long into adulthood. More than half of men between eighteen and twenty-four still live in their parents' home, male college students pass up dates to play Grand Theft Auto, and suburban dads spend hours a week trying to master the same sort of video games as their sons. While earlier generations of men had achieved the traditional benchmarks of masculine maturity–marriage, childbearing, stable employment, and a completed education–by their twenties, many fewer do so today. And this is precisely what troubles Gary Cross: the boy-man and the "culture of immaturity," he argues, have "become the norm rather than the exception" (p. 2).

Men to Boys is a historical and partially autobiographical study of the causes and consequences of modern immaturity. Writing in part to better understand his father's generation and his son's, Cross divides his book into three parts, analyzing first the "greatest generation" that came of age in the Depression and Second World War, then his own generation of baby boomers, and finally his son's cohort (Generation X) that grew up in the 1980s and 1990s. In each generation Cross focuses on white, middle-class men, analyzing a major segment of each generation but not potentially important divergences within generations. His method is cultural rather than sociological, focusing less on statistics and demographic data than on the ways in which popular culture has both shaped and reflected the changing aspirations and anxieties of American men.

Skeptics who question Cross's premise that the culture of immaturity now defines the normative culture won't find much in the way of quantitative data to persuade them. Cross's astute analysis of popular culture, however, presents compelling evidence that such a culture has taken root. Cross mines an impressive array of popular cultural forms–film, television, advertising, games and toys, childrearing advice literature–to demonstrate the erosion of earlier standards of male maturity and the rise of a new "culture of immaturity" that promotes thrill-seeking and legitimizes instant gratification. He both echoes and extends Christopher Lasch's searing critique of American culture in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), finding the roots of social disconnection and weakening individual constraints in a consumer culture that feeds on longings for perpetual youth and disdain for older models of maturity.

In 1950s and 1960s popular culture Cross identifies many models of mature masculinity that guided the so-called greatest generation, but he also finds the seeds of today's culture of immaturity. On television the heroes of westerns modeled responsible adult male decision mak-

ing, the doctor shows valorized experience and wisdom, and advertising (both print and broadcast) stressed men's duty to provide the accoutrements of the good life for their families. Although popular culture supplied plenty of counterpoints to the mature adult male–think of adult clowns such as Jerry Lewis and Abbott and Costello or bumbling, incompetent fathers such as Chester Riley–the tolerant, self-assured father dominated both the big and little screens. Jim Ward, Steve Douglas, and Jim Anderson–the understanding fathers on the respective TV sitcoms *Leave It to Beaver*, *My Three Sons*, and *Father Knows Best*–exemplified the ideal of the modern, permissive parent, each having mastered the delicate balance of trusting children while gently guiding them to maturity. Similarly, Judge Hardy in the popular Andy Hardy films, starring Mickey Rooney in the title role, set his impetuous teenage son on the path to maturity and responsibility by dispensing kindly advice. Audiences recognized Judge Hardy as an ideal father–"not an old-fashioned patriarch" but a "reassuring presence … who knew the differences between little and big things"–and the merits of accepting his advice (p. 42).

Despite the cultural power of these models of masculine maturity, many men of the "greatest generation," Cross argues, wrestled with the pressures of providership and confusion about the ambiguity of their role as a father. Childrearing authorities advised fathers to be playmates to their children and relate to children on their own level, but to do so without regressing into boyhood or losing their authority. Which was it, some wondered: playmate or authority? Most fifties dads did not become hot-rodders, playboys, or Beatniks who rejected bourgeois domesticity and the role of the company man, but reading *Playboy*, *Hot Rod Magazine*, and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) satisfied fantasies of escaping the restraints of providership and the consumer demands of their underappreciative dependents. "The disappointments of being a responsible adult," Cross writes, "were reflected in the bohemian dream life of thirty-five-year-old men" (p. 71).

Perhaps none lived out that dream life more fully than the quintessential boy-man Hugh Hefner, who stocked his refrigerator with peanut butter sandwiches, fried chicken, and Pepsi; checked in for work at 5 pm after sleeping off a late night; and spent weeknights watching movies, playing Monopoly, and playing the field. More commonly, middle-class fathers sought escape from the expectations of maturity through boyish hobbies and activities that they could enjoy with their sons. While such father-son activities as scouting, Little League, and building model railroads provided a temporary respite from maturity, they could also easily devolve into something less benign and more self-indulgent. Unsportsmanlike outbursts from over-invested Little League dads have been a feature of the boyhood games for more than half a century. All too often, Cross writes, "many crossed the fine line between using play to 'mold' the child and gratifying their personal needs, especially to return to their own childhoods" (p. 83).

Out-of-control Little League dads aside, Cross at times puts an overly negative spin on father-son hobbies, seeing in them the threat of regression and retreat from responsibility. I wonder, too, how many fathers became mired in confusion about the "ambiguities" of fatherhood. Striking the right balance between being a playmate and an authority can be difficult, to be sure, but plenty of fathers bumble through without existential crisis. Here greater attention to empirical evidence would have strengthened Cross's argument. What Cross contends is perfectly plausible, but absent some testimony from actual fathers of the era, it's not fully persuasive. Oral histories, memoirs, and contemporary commentary might better illuminate the roots, depth, and nature of the confusion.

While discontent with traditional models of male maturity simmered below the surface in Cross's father's generation, it exploded into the open in Cross's generation. White, middle-class baby boomers rebelled not just against parents and the political establishment, but against traditional expectations of what it meant to be a mature man. Boys who grew up listening to rock music and reading *Mad Magazine* and Vance Packard's critiques of advertising came to disdain conformity, mainstream consumer culture, and the soul-destroying work culture of the organization man. They faulted fathers for their unease with gender equality, their passive acceptance of exclusive male breadwinning, and their authoritarian ways (evidence perhaps that many fathers resolved their confusion over the new permissive ideal by not fully embracing their role as understanding pals). They rebelled against older markers of maturity by forsaking formality and military service, delaying marriage and fatherhood, and eschewing meaningless work. Some baby boomers refashioned themselves as the sensitive New Man who redefined maturity by becoming their wife's birth coach, her partner in childrearing and breadwinning, and an attentive lover.

Cross's account of rebellious baby boomers is far from celebratory, however, and devoid of the self-

congratulation that sometimes mars baby boomers' narrations of their own history. The men who flirted with the idea of the New Man, Cross writes, sometimes more closely resembled "an unhinged boy" (p. 128). Respectable political protest, Cross contends, gave way to rude defiance of university presidents and police. Too often, the quest for enlightenment through consciousness-expanding drugs gave way to drug abuse, while the preoccupation with self-discovery led to political and social disengagement. For some, rebellion became an excuse to continually defer commitments, obligations, and growing up. In the end, Cross concludes that baby boomers succeeded better at mocking the values of their elders than in modernizing ideals of male maturity. In practice, male support for feminism and gender equality remained weak and many rejected the New Man as wimpy. Further, "instead of creating a less consumerist society, we fueled a more dynamic and individualistic one" and paved the way "for the thrill-seeking culture of our sons" (p. 140). Although baby boomers sought to create alternative institutions, such as food co-ops, "few of these efforts changed much beyond the lives of a handful of dedicated souls" (p. 148). As baby boomers matured, they, too, were seduced by advertising's promises of perpetual youth and hip masculinity, helping to fuel growing markets for men's fitness products, skin care creams, hair dyes, and drugs to strengthen sexual potency.

Cross offers much insight into the complex and contradictory ways that men of his father's generation and his own wrestled with the meanings of masculinity and maturity. Unfortunately, his analysis of Generation X is not nearly as nuanced. Cross is so committed to narrating decline, to demonstrating that all the familiar markers of male maturity have collapsed under the weight of a pervasive culture of immaturity, that he flattens Gen Xers into a terrifying mass of unmodulated boy-men. The boy-man commercial culture of Gen Xers thrives on shattering all boundaries of taste and behavior through gross-out humor and "crude potty-mouthed comedies" like the *Austin Powers* movies and *South Park* TV series. Instead of mocking arrested male development, popular culture now embraced it. Instead of choosing men of reputation to promote prized brands, businesses hired spokesmen known for being "obnoxious loudmouths" such as John McEnroe and David Spade (p. 201). For Cross, the boy-man culture of Gen Xers isn't merely boyish, it seems to embody the very worst of boyishness. As if catering to a "frat-boy nation," advertising gives men "permission to be selfish and hedonistic" and to act like jerks (p. 202). Such self-absorption also translates into what Cross sees as men's new obsession with their own looks. Although one can find earlier twentieth-century antecedents of the fashion- and appearance-conscious man among mid-century readers of *Esquire* and *Playboy*, Cross contends that today's boyish-looking metrosexual (shorn of body hair and sporting highlights and dewy, exfoliated skin) desires not merely to maintain a youthful appearance but "to preserve a cherished childhood" (p. 240).

Models of masculine maturity also became harder to find on TV and in film. Parents and older adult mentors were mostly irrelevant on *Friends*, the popular sitcom revolving around unmarried thirty-somethings. Westerns and action films lost their moral purpose as they devolved into mere spectacles of violence. Even the sharp satire from the early years of *Saturday Night Live*, Cross opines, lost its edge to increasingly juvenile routines. Cross is most troubled, though, by the way violent video games magnify the worst aspects of the culture of immaturity. Shortened attention spans, impulsive aggression, addiction, atrophy of social skills, and self-absorption all result from playing with video games. More troubling still, men in their thirties, forties, and fifties can't seem to give them up. Not only have "modern toys … gradually lost their 'expiration dates,' " Cross laments, but "video games induce otherwise 'mature' men to forgo relationships with women and family (as well as more subtle and cultivated forms of leisure) for the highly individualistic and largely isolated encounter with the ephemeral thrill" (p. 223). Cross offers little more than anecdotal evidence to support such a broad indictment.

Cross paints a bleak picture, indeed, but it also borders on caricature. Baby boomers over the years have accused Gen Xers of many things–many of them contradictory. Gen Xers were both slackers and careerists (the ultimate insult from a generation who denigrated corporate work culture). They were the most politically apathetic generation and yet one that helped pioneer netroots political organizing. If *Saturday Night Live* has lost its edge (and that itself is debatable after a series of memorable 2008 election skits), certainly the *Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, shows with especially strong Gen X followings, have picked up the slack. Two of the most widely watched TV sitcoms–*The Cosby Show* and *The Wonder Years* (shows many Gen Xers watched either when they first aired or in reruns)–provided solid, if sometimes imperfect, models of male maturity and plenty of moral lessons delineating the path to responsible adulthood. So much so, in fact, that in the midst of raging cultural wars over family values (and declining respect for masculine maturity) President Ronald Reagan and many other

conservatives ranked *The Cosby Show* among their favorite TV shows. Recent elections also make Cross's assessment of Gen X seem uncharitable. Gen Xers, after all, voted in overwhelming numbers to elect President Barack Obama, a man whose calm, steady maturity ("No Drama Obama") endeared him to voters of all ages and deprived late-night comedians of easy material. Finally, while Cross sees delayed marriage and childbearing as troubling signs of immaturity on the rise, others might see them as hopeful signs that American men and women recognize the seriousness of both undertakings.

Cross's somewhat traditional approach to cultural analysis also exacerbates the heavy-handedness of his interpretation. He assumes that the effects of popular culture can be discerned from the meaning of the text, but his own interpretations of texts are sometimes too literal-minded. Instead of exploring the multivalent readings that might make such texts appealing, he flattens their meaning to conform to his thesis. Some attention to audience reception would have enhanced his analysis. Cross also seems to associate maturity with achieving a fixed identity, but is it not possible for men to take periodic holidays from maturity without altogether abandoning the values and behaviors associated with maturity? Perhaps men who find ways to compartmentalize their "immaturity" can still deliver as responsible providers and loving husbands and fathers when it counts.

By focusing so exclusively on popular culture as an all-powerful agent of socialization, Cross has also missed the opportunity to investigate social rituals, such as religious ceremonies, where male rites of passage from boyhood to manhood honor and perpetuate traditional markers of masculine maturity.

Like many polemicists, Cross is better at diagnosing the problem than providing solutions. His own prescriptions for creating new models of maturity are remarkably vague. He suggests that men "celebrate rather than deny generational difference," be better mentors, commit more time to personal life, and embrace "less ambiguous roles for husbands and fathers." Just what those less ambiguous roles for husbands and fathers would look like is anyone's guess, since Cross sees both the "pal dad" and the old-fashioned patriarch as failed models. Cross also suggests that men substitute more enduring pleasures for the ephemeral pleasures of consumer culture. Instead of gorging on thrill culture, which only supplies empty calories, Cross thinks men should nourish themselves by engaging in "cultivated conversation," enjoying "slow food," and developing "cultivated taste." He also recommends taking up new hobbies that offer "the pleasures of the savored moment and the adventure of prolonged effort." Just what kind of hobbies he has in mind is not clear, as he insists that men don't have to imitate the "genteel traditions of gardening, hiking, collecting, and crafts," but should merely look to them as examples of a "less intense, socially and culturally richer aesthetic" (pp. 256-258). In sum, Cross's vision of modern maturity looks a lot like a privileged academic's vision of the good life. Perhaps, Cross wants men to be more like him.

If Cross at times overstates his case, he has nonetheless made an important contribution to our understanding of major shifts in cultural values in the second half of the twentieth century. The "culture of immaturity" provides an interesting analytical framework for thinking about a host of changes in public and private life, including ones not discussed in the book. (One wonders, for example, what bearing the "culture of immaturity" has on our political culture and political discourse.) Cross skillfully illuminates both the manifestations and the consequences of the culture of immaturity. Less satisfying (and less developed) is Cross's explanation of the factors that contributed to the rise and spread of a "culture of immaturity." Cross contends that this culture compensates for the erosion of masculine power in the past thirty-forty years. Declining real wages and increasing numbers of working women and dual-income marriages undermined traditional male measures of self-worth and markers of adult manhood. Faced with fewer opportunities to earn distinction in the adult world, men instead sought satisfaction in consumerism (an explanation historians have trotted out to explain the increasing appeal of consumer culture in virtually every era since the turn of the last century). Cross also blames consumer culture itself, arguing that it exploits longings for perpetual youth and encourages the popular fixation with novelty and intense thrills. These explanations make sense, but they are also too pat and too imprecise. Different groups within generations have felt and experienced these historical changes with different degrees of intensity and different cultural impacts owing to variations in race, class, and ethnicity. Is the culture of immaturity more pronounced among certain groups than others and if so how does this correlate with social and economic change? Does the culture of immaturity manifest itself in different ways among different groups?

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Citation: Lisa Jacobson. Review of Cross, Gary S., *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

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