

## **The Secret Lives of Boys**

Inside the Raw Emotional World of Male Teens

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This was a book that Viannah had reviewed in her book reviewing work. She read it about a year earlier, then gave it to me for Father's Day. Although it looked interesting, it didn't look more interesting than anything else in my queue until one day I was picking up the next book to read and she asked when I was going to get to this one.

OK, so today then.

The thesis here seems to be that adolescent boys are misunderstood, characterized across the board as thugs, and shunted as such from normal society and that this is a gross, general mis-characterization. The author, through interviews and case studies with ten such boys from all over the place, aims to disprove this perception, showing that boys are as richly diverse as any other segment of society.

To this end the author does a good job. Before getting to that, however, let me first dispense with the two big issues I had with this book.

First, though I can see how it happens, I don't buy the thesis. People (boys included among all other classifications) who live in cities of millions in communities of hundreds of thousands and go to high schools of thousands, are indeed treated and perceived as cattle, as crowd control and mass management problems, as troublemaking molecules in a vast sea of ... issues. It is just impossible to look out over a sea of a million people and not see all the members of any category as just more instances of some same problem. Though the author disagrees, claiming that diversity among adolescent girls is well understood and accepted, I could certainly stereotype adolescent girls or their fathers or mothers or teachers or all the other people on the bus or train or all the members of some church or employees at some office or people from any possible grouping in similar ways. Indeed, we all do this. Humans must categorize in order to deal with the essentially infinite creation from within their finite perceptions and capacities.

I grew up in five distinct places (of which I have memories), four of which were "small town" rural. My identity was formed in towns of a few thousand and at schools of a few score, or a few hundred at most. I knew everybody and everybody knew me. From this and also because I was so often the new kid, an outsider, I was never stereotyped even if the other boys were. I also, in retrospect, worked hard to distinguish myself from the others by what I could do and what my interests were, which were always different from theirs. As I've met other people, made friends,

met friends of my children, been involved in various aspects of social life, it has not occurred to me to stereotype others except for the human need for categorization already mentioned. I must confess being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers here on the earth, however.

So, I could not connect with the thesis, though I could see why a person from a different place in the world could have it.

Second, I unfairly under-rate the author. Though this analysis disappointed Viannah, (who gave me the book) when I turned to the author's picture and biography in the rear cover flap, the woman glaring at me there looked like she was ready to bite off the head of a bat. More circumspectly, my impression is that she is a young journalist, hardly a decade or so older than her subjects, working very hard to establish herself professionally, going the distance with a great idea she had. She doubtless did come from the culture of millions where all the adolescent boys seemed like inarticulate thugs and she is fighting to right this grievous wrong. From that perspective, she has done an excellent job. If this problem really is out there, she has certainly put a dent in it.

So, with my issues declared, on to the book itself, the story of the ten boys. Viannah notes that she sees herself or her siblings in some way in each of them. She is clearly closer to the author and the subjects in perspective, age, and experience.

Following the introductory chapter "Madolence," (which seems self explanatory) here they are:

Indie Fuck  
Mini-Adult  
Optimist  
Troublemaker  
Gay, Vegan, Hearing-Impaired Republican  
Rich Kid  
Average American Kid  
Teenage Dad  
Homeschooler  
Sheltered One

These youths are from all over the country and all over the socio-economic landscape. In a final chapter "The Future" the author gives post high school updates. There aren't many surprises.

Until I was several chapters along, I did not even understand the title "Indie Fuck" of the first subject. I may not still. I didn't even know what "Indie" meant, but I suspected that "Fuck" had to do with being "in your face" about this person's self identity. (Or maybe it was just a declaration of his origins. Who knows?) It also establishes right up front that the author will not

indulge the reader with euphemism. After discrete inquiries, I established that “Indie” means “independent,” having to do loosely with the type of music that the Indie enjoys.

It did not help with my first problem (that I don’t buy the thesis) that the Indie Fuck came first. This kid’s entire existence seemed to be about trying to establish an identity for himself (an independent one, it would seem) within a high school class of two or more thousand by defining what he was not or what he was beyond, or, in generally, what about everybody else in sight was disgusting to him.

If I had a stereotype of adolescent boys based on personal observation, it would be a variant of this. It was painful, reviving experiences of my own adolescence, to go through this boy’s encyclopedic knowledge of exactly what one should wear and exactly where they should have bought it (or be perceived to have bought it), what cuts from what bands from which creative phase of their output one should be listening to, and so forth. To wear the right shirt, bought at the right place, but in slightly the wrong way would brand one as hopelessly “ten o’clock this morning,” and in a retro, hypocritical, wanna-be group that just couldn’t cut it for the Indie Fuck.

So let’s turn the page.

Despite the acute issues that each had, I felt worst for the last boy, the over protected one. His parents, perhaps fearing that he would become the stereotypical adolescent boy through exposure to all the “bad” that is “out there,” had him, even as a senior in high school, completely walled in, or so they thought. He had a cellphone on which he could only talk to his parents. He was driven to and picked up from everywhere. Every event was approved and planned. Non-superficial friends were not permitted. Even the interviews with the author were appropriately chaperoned. Of course, this boy had implemented the inevitable subterfuges. He was signed up for wrestling after school but often cut the club to meet with his girlfriend. Of course, a girlfriend would be unthinkable. He had his own, second, cellphone for a time until it was discovered and confiscated.

These parents had given up their own lives to protect their son from imagined unacceptable realities. This unwholesome level of protection was planned even for college. The parents had chosen the college for their son and were going to change jobs and move there so he could continue to live with them while he was there. General MacArthur is said to have had this sort of problem. He went to fight WWII in the Pacific and did not return to the states for decades, possibly to get away from a hovering mother.

By the way, this guy was liked by everybody. He had no enemies. Everything interrelates in unimaginable ways doesn’t it?

Without going to this level of detail about the other boys, one overarching theme (that the author may not intend) is that a lot of the weirdness in each case comes from weirdness in parents or lack of parents. The homeschooler, for example, isn’t always homes schooled but lives in an

idyllic community in New England somewhere that just doesn't have that much going on. Waste time in school when he could be pursuing his interests more efficiently? He wavers in and out, pushed and pulled by his mother.

The teenage dad is wrapped around his tiny daughter's finger. He still gets along with his daughter's mother. They may get around to getting married someday but there are issues to be worked through.

The rich kid is an interesting case. He experiences no resource limitations and seemingly infinite freedoms, at least within his family structure, but he suffers a severe case of obsessive compulsive disorder. A friend, an older boy who the family has hired to be his friend, is very helpful, but it makes me wonder if OCD isn't an expression of society like allergies are for individuals. Things are so clean these days that our immune systems don't have much to do and sometimes go nuts at the most innocuous things, like dust, pollen, or cat hair. Things have been clean like this since Pasteur, so allergies seem normal to us but back when nothing was ever washed, allergies weren't even reported. Maybe the people just died. Maybe their real problems made allergies seem like nothing. Maybe their immune systems hadn't gone nuts. I note that the troublemaker and the teenage dad didn't report anything like OCD. Maybe they don't have time for it or maybe they don't need problems like that to worry about. (Or, yes, maybe they just don't have OCD.)

The average American kid is Aziz Mohammad, a Muslim. He thinks bowling is easy and has bowled a 310. How is that possible? All I could think was, "the phone wouldn't give you that!"

I won't say any more about the gay, vegan, hearing-impaired Republican. His title is entertainment enough. Read the book for details.

Of course, all these boys judged themselves "more mature" than average. This seems to be universal. Most of them felt for one reason or another that they didn't fit in, some from external factors, like having a deadbeat absentee dad or friends in jail, others from internally generated angst. Pain everywhere.

This book was probably more useful to me in showing me about adolescent boys a generation and a half after myself. Some of the issues are timeless, others are exacerbated by time and place, and by increasing population. Do I think my son John is a thug? No. His friends? No. I think of them more as goofballs. Is that an unfair stereotype? Probably. Maybe, from my point of view, they'll grow out of it....