

GUYLAND

WELCOME TO GUYLAND

*The ignominy of boyhood; the distress
Of boyhood changing into man;
The unfinished man and his pain.*

—WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS
“A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (1933)

Jeff* is 24, tall and fit, with shaggy brown hair and an easy smile. After graduating from Brown three years ago, with an honors degree in history and anthropology, he moved back home to the Boston suburbs and started looking for a job. After several months, he found one, as a sales representative for a small Internet provider. He stays in touch with friends from college by text message and email, and still heads downtown on weekends to hang out at Boston’s “Brown bars.” “It’s kinda like I never left college,” he says, with a mixture of resignation and pleasure. “Same friends, same aimlessness.”

Andy is 17, a high-school senior in the San Diego area. Affable, slightly chubby, and wearing glasses, his Chargers jersey signals his interest in sports. At the moment, he’s waiting to hear to which University of California campus he’ll be accepted. Or if he’ll be accepted. Once a

* Jeff is not his real name. All the names of interviewees, and some identifying details, have been changed.

reasonably good student, he says he now worries that he's spent so much time playing video games and hanging out in online communities that he hasn't studied hard enough and that his grades have suffered. "I just get kinda lost in there, your know?" he says. "My parents think I'm doing homework all the time, so I sorta keep it a secret." While he was hoping for UCLA or Santa Barbara, he is also sending in a few applications to other, less competitive state colleges, just in case. "My parents are going to freak if I don't get into UCLA," he says, wincing.

Brian is 21, a senior chemistry major at Indiana. Serious and earnest, he is putting himself through school by working two jobs off campus—waiting tables in a local restaurant on weekends and stacking books in the science library during the week when he is not in class or lab. An honors student, he wakes up at about six every morning so he can study in quiet in his dorm room.

His freshman roommate, Dave, still a friend, has approached college life somewhat differently. A business major, Dave usually wakes up around noon, hangs out at his fraternity house playing video games with his fraternity brothers until dinner, and then heads out to the local bars for the night. He estimates that he drinks five nights a week, parties all weekend, and studies only the night before finals, if then. He had been putting himself through school gambling online, but he ran into a streak of bad luck and now owes about \$12,000.

We sit together in one of the many snack bars around campus. "I don't understand Dave, never did," Brian says. "But he's my friend anyway, and he invites me to the cool parties, which, I confess, I never go to."

"Listen," Dave replies, "he doesn't understand *me*? I think it's great to want to have a career and all, but Brian is, like, so tight, you know. He's such a go-getter. He doesn't get that college is about parties and fun—oh, and did I mention the drinking?" He laughs.

Jason graduated from Dartmouth almost five years ago. Now 26, he works in finance in Boston and shares a Back Bay apartment with five other guys with whom he went to school. He runs and works out, stays fit, and dates lots of different women—all in their early twenties. At night, he hangs out at the "Dartmouth bars" of Boston. "Hey, college was supposed to be the best years of your life, right?" he explains, with

only a trace of defensiveness in his voice. "So where is it written that it has to end when you graduate? College is forever, man. That's what the admissions guys say—that these will be your friends forever. Well, forever is now."

These are some of the young men you will meet in this book. They're among the nearly 400 I've interviewed over the past four years—on college campuses, in neighborhood bars and coffee shops, in Internet chat rooms, and at sports events. Most of them are college educated, from good homes in reasonably affluent suburbs and urban areas. Most are white, but I talked with plenty of Latino, African-American, and Asian-American guys. Most are middle class, but I also made sure to talk with high-school grads who never went to college but instead worked in auto body shops, served in the military, and opened small businesses. Most were straight, but I spoke with quite a few gay and bisexual guys as well.

In another era, these guys would undoubtedly be poised to take their place in the adult world, taking the first steps toward becoming the nation's future professionals, entrepreneurs, and business leaders. They would be engaged to be married, thinking about settling down with a family, preparing for futures as civic leaders and Little League dads. Not today.

Today, many of these young men, poised between adolescence and adulthood, are more likely to feel anxious and uncertain. In college, they party hard but are soft on studying. They slip through the academic cracks, another face in a large lecture hall, getting by with little effort and less commitment. After graduation, they drift aimlessly from one dead-end job to another, spend more time online playing video games and gambling than they do on dates (and probably spend more money too), "hook up" occasionally with a "friend with benefits," go out with their buddies, drink too much, and save too little. After college, they perpetuate that experience and move home or live in group apartments in major cities, with several other guys from their dorm or fraternity. They watch a lot of sports. They have grandiose visions for their futures and not a clue how to get from here to there. When they do try and articulate this amorphous uncertainty, they're likely to paper over it with a simple "it's all good."

You can find them in New York's Murray Hill, or Silver Lake and Echo Park in Los Angeles, Houston's Midtown, or Atlanta's Buckhead district, sipping their mocha lattes in the local Starbucks and crowding upmarket pool halls; some are banker boys in cargo shorts, untucked striped Oxford shirts, and baseball caps; and others still sport the T-shirts or flannel shirts of their college days. They are the "friendsters" with their wi-fi computers looking for love, friendship, or hookups, or on monster.com looking for next month's job. In a scene that makes the TV show *Friends* appear more like a documentary, they double and triple up in their overpriced apartments, five or six guys in a two-bedroom pad, re-creating their collegiate lifestyle in the big city. "Murray Hill has more young people that just graduated from college than any other neighborhood in the city," gushes one very happy Manhattan realtor, who estimates that 90 percent of his rentals go to young people aged 21 to 25.

At night, they'll all troop off to bars that are branded as collegiate alumni bars, such as Beacon Hill Pub or Cleary's, Boston's "Dartmouth bars" because there are so many recent Dartmouth grads in the city who congregate there. High school may be over at eighteen, college at twenty-two, but the same social life often continues for another several years. Bars advertise "Spring Break 52 Weeks a Year!" and others promote college-party atmospheres for the post-college party set. Many post-grads move in a languorous mass, a collection of anomic nomads looking for someplace to go.

Welcome to Guyland:

Guyland is the world in which young men live. It is both a stage of life, a liminal undefined time span between adolescence and adulthood that can often stretch for a decade or more, and a place, or, rather, a bunch of places where guys gather to be guys with each other, unhas- sled by the demands of parents, girlfriends, jobs, kids, and the other nuisances of adult life. In this topsy-turvy, Peter-Pan mindset, young men shirk the responsibilities of adulthood and remain fixated on the trappings of boyhood, while the boys they still are struggle heroically to prove that they are real men despite all evidence to the contrary.

Males between 16 and 26 number well over 22 million—more than 15 percent of the total male population in the United States. The "guy" age bracket represents the front end of the single most desirable consumer market, according to advertisers. It's the group constantly targeted by major Hollywood studios, in part because this group sees the same shoot-em-up action film so many times on initial release. They're targeted in several of the most successful magazine launches in recent memory, magazines like *Men's Health*, *Maxim*, *FHM*, *Details*, and *Stuff*. Guys in this age bracket are the primary viewers of the countless sports channels on television. They consume the overwhelming majority of recorded music, video games, and computer technology, and they are the majority of first-time car buyers.

Yet aside from assiduous market research, Guyland is a *terra incognita*; it has never been adequately mapped. Many of us only know we've landed there when we feel distraught about our children, anxious that they have entered, or will be entering, a world that we barely know. We sense them moving away from us, developing allegiances and attitudes we neither understand nor support. Recently, a teacher at a middle school told me about his own 16-year-old son, Nick. "When we're together, he's excited, happy, curious, and so connected," he told me.

"But when I drove him to school this morning, I watched an amazing transformation. In the car, Nick was speaking animatedly about something. As we arrived at his school, though, I saw him scan the playground for his friends. He got out of the car, still buoyant, with a bounce in his step. But as soon as he caught sight of his friends he instantly fell into that slouchy 'I don't give a shit' amble that teenagers get. I think I actually watched him become a 'guy'!"

Parents often feel we no longer know them—the young guys in our lives.

Just what are they doing in their rooms at all hours of the night? And what are they doing in college? And why are they so aimless and directionless when they graduate that they take dead-end jobs and move back

home? When they come home for college vacations, we wonder just who is this new person who talks about ledge parties and power hours—and what happened to the motivated young man who left for college with such high hopes and a keen sense of purpose. And guys themselves often wonder where they left their dreams.

Every time we read about vicious gay-baiting and bullying in a high school, every time the nightly news depicts the grim horror of a school shooting, every time we hear about teen binge drinking, random sexual hookups, or a hazing death at a college fraternity, we feel that anxiety, that dread. And we ask ourselves, "Could that be my son?" Or, "Could that be my friend, or even my boyfriend?" Or, even "could that be *me*?"

Well, to be honest, probably not. Most guys are not predators, not criminals, and neither so consumed with adolescent rage nor so caught in the thrall of masculine entitlement that they are likely to end up with a rap sheet instead of a college transcript. But most guys know other guys who *are* chronic substance abusers, who *have* sexually assaulted their classmates. They swim in the same water, breathe the same air. Those appalling headlines are only the farthest extremes of a continuum of attitudes and behaviors that stretches back to embrace so many young men, and that so circumscribes their lives that even if they don't want to participate, they still must contend with it.

Guyland is not some esoteric planet inhabited only by alien creatures—despite how alien our teenage and 20-something sons might seem at times. It's the world of everyday "guys." Nor is it a state of arrested development, a case of prolonged adolescence among a cadre of slackers. It has become a stage of life, a "demographic," that is now pretty much the norm. Without fixed age boundaries, young men typically enter Guyland before they turn 16, and they begin to leave in their mid to late 20s. This period now has a definable shape and texture, a topography that can be mapped and explored. A kind of suspended animation between boyhood and manhood, Guyland lies between the dependency and lack of autonomy of boyhood and the sacrifice and responsibility of manhood. Wherever they are living, whatever they are doing, and whomever they are hooking up with, Guyland is a dramatically new stage of development with its own rules and limitations. It is

a period of life that demands examination—and not just because of the appalling headlines that greet us on such a regular basis. As urgent as it may seem to explore and expose Guyland because of the egregious behaviors of the few, it may be more urgent to examine the ubiquity of Guyland in the lives of almost everyone else.

It's easy to observe "guys" virtually everywhere in America—in every high school and college campus in America, with their baseball caps on frontward or backward, their easy smiles or anxious darting eyes, huddled around tiny electronic gadgets or laptops, or relaxing in front of massive wide-screen hi-def TVs, in basements, dorms, and frat houses. But it would be a mistake to assume that each conforms fully to a regime of peer-influenced and enforced behaviors that I call the "Guy Code," or shares all traits and attitudes with everyone else. It's important to remember that individual guys are not the same as "Guyland."

In fact, my point is precisely the opposite. Though Guyland is pervasive—it is the air guys breathe, the water they drink—each guy cuts his own deal with it as he tries to navigate the passage from adolescence to adulthood without succumbing to the most soul-numbing, spirit-crushing elements that surround him every day.

Guys often feel they're entirely on their own as they navigate the murky shallows and the dangerous eddies that run in Guyland's swift current. They often stop talking to their parents, who "just don't get it." Other adults seem equally clueless. And they can't confide in one another lest they risk being exposed for the confused creatures they are. So they're left alone, confused, trying to come to terms with a world they themselves barely understand. They couch their insecurity in bravado and bluster, a fearless strut barely concealing a tremulous anxiety. They test themselves in fantasy worlds and in drinking contests, enduring humiliation and pain at the hands of others.

All the while, many do suspect that something's rotten in the state of *Manhood*. They struggle to conceal their own sense of fraudulence, and can smell it on others. But few can admit to it, lest all the emperors-to-be will be revealed as disrobed. They go along, in mime.

Just as one can support the troops but oppose the war, so too can one appreciate and support individual guys while engaging critically with

the social and cultural world they inhabit. In fact, I believe that only by understanding this world can we truly be empathic to the guys in our lives. We need to enter this world, see the perilous field in which boys become men in our society because we desperately need to start a conversation about that world. We do boys a great disservice by turning away, excusing the excesses of Guyland as just "boys being boys"—because we fail to see just how powerful its influence really is. Only when we begin to engage in these conversations, with open eyes and open hearts—as parents to children, as friends, as guys themselves—can we both reduce the risks and enable guys to navigate it more successfully. This book is an attempt to map that terrain in order to enable guys—and those who know them, care about them, love them—to steer a course with greater integrity and honesty, so they can be true not to some artificial code, but to themselves.

Just Who Are These Guys?

The guys who populate Guyland are mostly white, middle-class kids; they are college-bound, in college, or have recently graduated; they're unmarried. They live communally with other guys, in dorms, apartments, or fraternities. Or they live with their parents (even after college). Their jobs, if they have them, are modest, low-paying, low-prestige ones in the service sector or entry-level corporate jobs that leave them with plenty of time to party. They're good kids, by and large. They blend into the crowd, drift with the tide, and often pass unnoticed through the lecture halls and multistory dorms of America's large college campuses.

Of course, there are many young people of this age group who are highly motivated, focused, with a clear vision and direction in their lives. Their stories of resilience and motivation will provide a telling rejoinder to many of the dominant patterns of Guyland. There are also just as many who immediately move back home after college, directionless, with a liberal arts BA that qualifies them for nothing more than a dead-end job making lattes or folding jeans. So while a few of them might jump right into a career or graduate school immediately after college, many more simply drift for a while, comforting themselves with

the assurances that they have plenty of time to settle down later, after they've had their fun.

In some respects, Guyland can be defined by what guys do for fun. It's the "boyhood" side of the continuum they're so reluctant to leave. It's drinking, sex, and video games. It's watching sports, reading about sports, listening to sports on the radio. It's television—cartoons, reality shows, music videos, shoot-em-up movies, sports, and porn—pizza, and beer. It's all the behavior that makes the real grownups in their lives roll their eyes and wonder, "When will he *grow up*?!"

There are some parts of Guyland that are quite positive. The advancing age of marriage, for example, benefits both women and men, who have more time to explore career opportunities, not to mention establishing their identities, before committing to home and family. And much of what qualifies as fun in Guyland is relatively harmless. Guys grow out of a lot of the sophomoric humor—if not after their "sophomore" year, then at least by their mid-twenties.

Yet, there is a disturbing undercurrent to much of it as well. Teenage boys spend countless hours blowing up the galaxy, graphically splattering their computer screens in violent video games. College guys post pornography everywhere in their dorm rooms; indeed, pornographic pictures are among the most popular screen savers on male college students' computers. In fraternities and dorms on virtually every campus, plenty of guys are getting drunk almost every night, prowling for women with whom they can hook up, and chalking it all up to harmless fun. White suburban boys don do-rags and gangsta tattoos appropriating inner-city African-American styles to be cool. Homophobia is ubiquitous; indeed, "that's so gay" is probably the most frequently used put-down in middle schools, high schools, and college today. And sometimes gay-baiting takes an ugly turn and becomes gay-bashing.

All the while, these young people are listening to shock jocks on the radio, laughing at cable-rated T&A on the current generation's spin-offs of "The Man Show" and watching Spike TV, the "man's network," guffawing to sophomoric body-fluid humor of college circuit comedians who make Beavis and Butt-head sound quaint. They're laughing at clueless henpecked husbands on TV sitcoms; snorting derisively at guys

who say the wrong thing on beer ads; snickering at duded-up metrosexuals prancing around major metropolitan centers drinking Cosmos and imported vodka. Unapologetically "politically incorrect" magazines, radio hosts, and television shows abound, filled with macho bluster and bikini-clad women bouncing on trampolines. And the soundtrack in these new 'boys' clubhouses, the sonic wallpaper in every dorm room and every shared apartment, is some of the angriest music ever made. Nearly four out of every five gangsta rap CDs are bought by suburban white guys. It is not just the "boys in the hood" who are a "menace to society." It's the boys in the "burbs."

Occasionally, the news from Guyland is shocking—and sometimes even criminal. There are guys who are drinking themselves into oblivion on campus on any given night of the week, organizing parties where they spike women's drinks with Rohypnol (the date rape drug), or just try to ply them with alcohol to make them more compliant—and then videotaping their conquests. These are the guys who are devising elaborately sadomasochistic hazing rituals for high-school athletic teams, collegiate fraternities, or military squads.

It is true, of course, that white guys do not have a monopoly on appalling behavior. There are plenty of young black and Latino boys who are equally desperate to prove their manhood, to test themselves before the watchful evaluative eyes of other guys. But only among white boys do the negative dynamics of Guyland seem to play themselves out so invisibly. Often, when there's news of young black boys behaving badly, the media takes on a "what can you expect?" attitude, failing to recognize that expecting such behavior from black men is just plain racism. But every time white boys hit the headlines, regardless of how frequently, there is an element of shock, a collective, "How could this happen? He came from such a good family!" Perhaps not identifying the parallel criminal behavior among white guys adds an additional cultural element to the equation: identification. Middle-class white families see the perpetrators as "our guys." We know them, we are them, they cannot be like that.

Though Guyland is not exclusively white, neither is it an equal-opportunity venture. Guyland rests on a bed of middle-class entitle-

ment, a privileged sense that you are special, that the world is there for you to take. Upwardly mobile minorities feel the same tugs between claiming their rightful share of good times and delaying adult responsibilities that the more privileged white guys feel. But it often works itself out differently for them. Because of the needs and expectations of their families, they tend to opt for a more traditional trajectory. Indeed, many minority youths have begun to move into those slots designated for the ambitious and motivated, just at the moment that those slots are being abandoned by white guys having fun.

Some think they're fulfilling the American Dream, yet most feel as if they're wearing another man's clothes. Take Carlos, the son of illegal immigrants, who worked in the central California fields, harvesting artichokes and Brussels sprouts. Carlos is their success story, a track star and good student, who got recruited to several colleges and landed a scholarship to USC. But now he feels torn between the pressure from his family "to be the first in everything"—the first college grad, the first doctor—and from his friends in his hometown of Gilroy to hang out with them over the summer.

Or Eric, who just graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta. He says he's "out of step" with his other African-American friends; he is highly motivated and serious, eschews hip-hop, and always knew he wanted to get married, start a family, and get a good job. Heavily recruited out of college, he's already a regional manager for Coca-Cola in Atlanta and dating a senior at Spelman. They plan to marry next June. "Too many of my friends think gangsta is the way to go," he says, nodding at a table nearby of college guys sporting the latest do-rags and bling. "But in my family, being a man meant stepping up and being responsible. That was what being a Morehouse Man meant to me. I can live with that."

And while the American college campus is Guyland Central, guys who don't go to college have ample opportunities—in the military, in police stations and firehouses, on every construction site and in every factory, in every neighborhood bar—for the intimately crude male bonding that characterizes Guyland's standard operating procedure. Sure, some working-class guys cannot afford to prolong their adolescence;

their family needs them, and their grownup income, too badly. With no college degree to fall back on, and parents who are not financially able or willing to support a prolonged adolescence, they don't have the safety net that makes Guyland possible. But they find other ways, symbolic or real, at work or at play, to hold onto their glory days—or they become so resentful they seethe with jealous rage at the privileged few who seem able to delay responsibility indefinitely.

Greg, for example, never made it to college. He didn't regret it at the time, but now he wonders. The son and grandson of steel workers near Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Greg knew he'd end up at Beth Steel also—except the steel plant closed and suddenly all those jobs disappeared. Even if he could go to college now, it's too expensive, and besides, he needs to save for a new car so he can move out of his parents' house. In the past two years he's worked at a gas station, Home Depot, a mini-mart convenience store, and as a groundskeeper at a local university. "I'm trying, honest, I really am," he says, with a certain resigned sadness already creeping into his 24-year-old eyes. "But there is just no way an honest white guy can make a living in this economy—not with these Bush fat cats and all the illegals."

Rather than embracing Guyland as a way of life, working-class guys instead seem to inhabit Guyland at their local sports bar, on the factory shop floor, and in the bowling league or military unit. Yet the same sense of entitlement, the same outraged response to the waning of privilege, is clear. One Brooklyn bar near my house has been home to generations of firefighters and their pals. There's an easy ambience about the place, the comfort of younger and older guys (all white) sharing a beer and shooting the breeze. Until I happen to ask one guy about female firefighters. The atmosphere turns menacing, and a defensive anger spills out of the guys near me. "Those bitches have taken over," says Patrick.

They're everywhere. You know that ad "it's everywhere you want to be." That's like women. *They're* everywhere *they* want to be! There's nowhere you can go anymore—factories, beer joints, military, even the goddamned firehouse! [Raucous agreement all around.] We working guys are just fucked.

The camaraderie of working-class guys long celebrated in American history and romanticized in Hollywood films—the playful bonding of the locker room, the sacrificial love of the foxhole, the courageous tenacity of the firehouse or police station—has a darker side. Homophobic harassment of the new guys, racial slurs, and seething sexism often lie alongside the casual banter of the band of brothers, and this is true in both the working-class bar and the university coffee house.

And although my focus is American guys, Guyland is not exclusively American terrain. Both Britain and Australia have begun to examine "Laddism"—the anomic, free-floating, unattached and often boorish behavior of young males. "Lads" are Guys with British accents—consuming the same media, engaging in the same sorts of behaviors, and lubricating their activities with the same alcohol. In Italy, they're called *bamboccioni*, or "*mammoni*," or Mama's boys. Half of all Italian men between 25 and 34 live with their parents. In France, they're called "*Tanguys*" after the French film with that title about their lifestyle.

Guyland revolves almost exclusively around other guys. It is a social space as well as a time zone—a pure, homosocial Eden, uncorrupted by the sober responsibilities of adulthood. The motto of Guyland is simple: "Bros Before Hos." (Long "o" in both Bro and Ho.) Just about every guy knows this—knows that his "brothers" are his real soul mates, his real life-partners. To them he swears allegiance and will take their secrets to his grave. And guys do not live in Guyland all the time. They take temporary vacations—when they are alone with their girlfriends or even a female friend, or when they are with their parents, teachers, or coaches.

Girls in Guyland—Babes in Boyland

What about girls? Guys love girls—all that homosociality might become suspect if they didn't! It's *women* they can't stand. Guyland is the more grownup version of the clubhouse on *The Little Rascals*—the "He-Man Woman Haters Club." Women demand responsibility and respectability, the antitheses of Guyland. Girls are fun and sexy, even friends, as long as they respect the centrality of guys' commitment to the

band of brothers. And when girls are allowed in, they have to play by guy rules—or they don't get to play at all.

Girls contend daily with Guyland—the constant stream of pornographic humor in college dorms or libraries, or at countless work stations in offices across the country; the constant pressure to shape their bodies into idealized hyper-Barbies. Guyland sets the terms under which girls try to claim their own agency, develop their own senses of self. Guyland sets the terms of friendship, of sexual activity, of who is “in” and who is decidedly “out.” Girls can even *be* guys—if they know something about sports (but not too much), enjoy casual banter about sex (but not too actively), and dress and act in ways that are pleasantly unthreatening to boys' fragile sense of masculinity.

Some of the girls have mastered the slouching look, the indifferent affect, the contemptuous attitude, the swaggering posture, the foul language, and the aggressive behaviors of guys. Since Guyland is often the only game in town, who can blame them if they indulge in a little—or a lot—of what I call “guyification?” Observe a group of college-age women. It's likely they're wearing jeans, T-shirts, oversized sweatshirts, running shoes or sandals—guywear. If not, they'll be wearing thong underwear, skimpy mini T-shirts that leave their midriffs bare, and supertight pants, leggings, or miniskirts. And for which gender are they getting all Barbied up? (Here's a quiz: Which gender invented the thong and presents it as the latest fashion accessory for women?) And listen as they call each other “guys” all the time, even when no actual guys are around. It's become the generic term for “person.”

Some girls have parlayed their post-feminist assertiveness into “girl power,” or *grrrl* power. A few think that they can achieve equality by imitating guys' behaviors—by running circles around them on the athletic field or matching them drink for drink or sexual hookup for hookup. But it's a cruel distortion of those ideals of early feminist liberation when female assertiveness is redefined as the willingness to hike up your sweater and reveal your breasts for a roving camera in a “Girls Gone Wild” video. And sexual equality is hardly achieved when she is willing to perform oral sex on his entire group of friends.

And most girls also know the motto “Bros Before Hos.” A girl senses

that she is less than, not a bro, and that underneath all his syrupy flattery is the condescension and contempt one naturally has for a ho. Girls also know the joke about the difference between a bitch and a slut (their only two choices in Guyland): “A bitch will sleep with everyone but you.” Girls live in Guyland, but they do not define it. They contend with it and make their peace with it, each in their own way.

Grinding to a Halt?

Guyland now even has its own literature. In both the United States and in Britain, there is a new genre, a masculine riposte to the “chick lit” fiction of Bridget Jones's diaries. In Britain, the slightly slackeresque musings of Nick Hornby lead the pack. But Hornby cleverly criticizes the very culture he is examining, and while his lads—Rob in *High Fidelity* and Will Lightman in *About a Boy*—initially drift along aimlessly, worldly-wise and wise-cracking, something eventually happens to them and they grow up, settle down, and get a life.

Not so their American cousins in such recent novels as *Booty Nomad* by Scott Mebus, *Love Monkey* by Kyle Smith, and the widely praised *Indecision* by Benjamin Kunkel. These preternatural Peter Pans simply won't grow up, no matter what happens to them. Jaded and cynical well before their time, they watch; they criticize, they stand aloof and apart. They can't go back to Neanderthal masculinity; they can't move forward to embrace some sensitive new-age guydom. They're stuck where they are: in eternal boyhood. In fact, Kunkel's main character suffers from a new psychological malady, *abulia*, defined as the chronic inability to make a decision (hence the book's title). They cannot commit—to their girlfriends, their jobs, or even to a purposeful life. Nor do they seem especially professionally ambitious. They drift from job to job; some are fired, some quit.

No wonder literary critic Laura Miller posted the genre's obituary at the moment of its birth. In an essay in the *New York Times Book Review*, she wrote that “[i]f female readers allowed themselves to believe that most straight men spend their time holding conversations with their penises, watching the Cartoon Network, fiddling with their rotisserie

baseball teams and contemplating the fine art of passing gas on subway trains, romance—and perhaps even human reproduction itself—would grind to a halt.”

Why Now?

But surely, you're probably saying to yourself, this is nothing new. Guys have been acting this way since—well, since there were guys. They've always taken risks—getting drunk and driving fast, fighting, bullying smaller guys—all to prove their masculinity.

When I was a young man, there were more possibilities to swim against the current; Guyland was hardly the only arena. One could be serious, sober, stable, and responsible, as readily as wild, boisterous, and predatory. One could be independent, an individual, without being seen as a freak or a loner. There were always other cliques to join for support. Back then different schools, different neighborhoods, different workplaces, even different military units all had different local cultures. Not anymore. One of the great contradictions of our era is that there is a super-abundance of choices now, far more than ever before, and yet the range of those choices somehow feels more constricted, and more constricting, than ever. “There’s 57 channels, and nothing on,” Bruce Springsteen sang—and that was 250 channels ago! More choices may not mean greater freedom, just a larger number of possible alternatives that are dismissed as wannabes and also-rans.

The dramatic increase in alternatives is accompanied by an equally dramatic cultural homogenization, a flattening of regional and local differences with a single mainstream dominant culture prevailing. Accents are losing their distinct regional flair, local cuisines are losing their regional flavors (often only to re-create them for tourists), downtown villages are being replaced by strip malls on the outskirts of town featuring the same national chain stores from coast to coast. One large state university campus looks very much like any other; indeed, you’d be hard pressed, without looking at the names on the sweatshirts, to tell Ole Miss from Michigan, or Texas from Tennessee, Akron from Albany. Music, TV, and the Internet ensure that parties, and party-goers,

all look the same. And the Power Hour, a drinking ritual that ushers virtually every collegiate 21-year-old into legal drinking age, features roughly the same vile alcoholic concoctions in the same ritualistic order—all experienced as spontaneous fun—no matter where you are in the country.

What this has come to mean is that while there are more possible identities for a young boy to gravitate toward—hippie, stoner, skater, nerd, prep, wigger, and a long list of others—the pressure *not* to choose one of these alternatives is also increasing. Each of these subcultures has been marginalized in high-school locker rooms and cafeterias, where Guyland in capital letters begins to hold sway over the adolescent imagination.

Nerds, geeks, wonks, and dorm rats learn to keep their heads down and avoid drawing attention to themselves if they want to be left alone and not get bullied, beat up, or worse. Other campus subcultures—Goths, punks, anarchists, politicians—are really counter-cultures: That is, they define themselves in opposition to the dominant Guyland ethos. The former is marginalized, the second defiantly rejecting—but both define, and are defined by, Guyland. Nerds may plot their revenge together in private, but in public they usually cut a narrow swath.

What’s more, the stakes are higher, the violence more extreme, the weapons more lethal. In 1967, the *New York Times* and the *Yale Daily News* reacted with mortified disdain to stories about fraternity branding; today, hundreds of pledges are ritually branded every year with nary an eyebrow raised. Emergency rooms at campus-based hospitals bulge with alcohol-related injuries and illnesses virtually every weekend, and they overflow during pledge week events. At least one pledge has died during some campus-based event every year for the past decade.

The entire landscape of Guyland is structured by the massive social and economic changes in the United States over the past several decades. As Susan Faludi documented in her book *Stiffed*, men who once found meaning and social value in their work are increasingly pushed into lower-wage service occupations; as the economy has shifted from a culture of production to a culture of consumption men experience their masculinity less as providers and protectors, and more as consumers,

as "ornaments." Many men feel "downsized"—both economically and emotionally; they feel smaller, less essential, less like real men.

At the same time, women have entered every single arena once completely dominated by men. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, virtually every all-male college went coed, the military integrated, as did police stations, and firehouses, and every single profession and occupation. Where once there were so many places where men could validate their masculinity, proving it in the eyes of other men, there are today fewer and fewer places where they aren't also competing with women.

It might seem ironic that Guyland encompasses an ever-expanding age spectrum, from mid-teens through the late twenties at the same time that the social space of Guyland is shrinking enormously. But young men are seeking what used to be so easy to find by pushing the age limits of their boyhoods as far into their twenties as they possibly can. That is why they are often so defensive: they've lost the casual ease of proving themselves to other guys that they once took for granted.

Yes, young men have always wanted to prove themselves, and that is nothing new. But today that desire has a distinct tone of desperation to it. In a world where their entitlement is eroding, where the racism and sexism that supported white male privilege for decades is taking hits left and right, where women are "everywhere they want to be," and affirmative action has provided at least some opportunities to minorities, the need for a "Band of Brothers" feels stronger than ever.

Grownups in Guyland

When I talk with adults about Guyland, I'm often met with confusion. Surely, say some parents, these headline-grabbing behaviors aren't about my son. And, by and large, they're right. But they are about the world their son inhabits, what goes on around him, what he knows about and won't say. It's perhaps a world into which he retreats when he logs on, texts his friends, watches TV, or plays video games, parties, drinks, and hooks up. Many parents are eager to raise these issues with their sons and daughters. But how? What can they say?

It's ironic that American parents are often chastised as "helicopter

parents"—hovering so closely and insistently in their children's lives, constraining their developing sense of autonomy—until, that is, the day they go off to college, at which point they frequently wash their hands of the whole thing and become absentee parents. Their children, straining all during their adolescence for more latitude, dutifully troop off to college with little understanding of how to manage responsibly such freedom. And freedom without responsibility is a volatile combination. All hell often breaks loose.

In an effort to prove their masculinity, with little guidance and no real understanding of what manhood is, they engage in behaviors and activities that are ill-conceived and irresponsibly carried out. These are the guys who are so desperate to be accepted by their peers that they do all sorts of things they secretly know to be not quite right. They lie about their sexual experiences to seem more manly; they drink more than they know they can handle because they don't want to seem weak or immature; they sheepishly engage in locker-room talk about young women they actually like and respect. These are the guys who want to do well in school but don't want to be seen as geeks; the guys who think they can't be cool and responsible at the same time; the pledges and pledgemasters whose hazing rituals are frequently disgusting, sometimes barbaric, and occasionally lethal. With no adults around running the show, they turn to each other for initiation into manhood.

There is, incidentally, no profound societal need served by such initiation; plenty of healthy functioning societies do without them altogether. But many of Guyland's fiercest defenders argue that initiation serves some psychological hunger that boys feel, a desperate urge to be validated as men. This only begs the question: Why do they feel such a need in the first place, and how could they possibly have their masculinity validated by their peers, when those peers are only "men" by virtue of having declared it themselves? Such rituals, absent any adult participation, are desperate frauds, and, I suspect, the participants sense this fraud, which only fuels their eagerness to participate in increasingly desperate and dangerous rites in order to prove it.

To be sure, there are plenty of arduous initiation rituals in other cultures. But, as we'll see, every other culture assigns to the grownups the

task of supervising those rituals, to let the boys feel tested, but also to ensure that they all safely pass. (After all, how could a culture survive if it made its initiation rituals so rigorous that only a few boys actually succeeded?) And after their rituals, young males are validated as men and there is no going back.

American parents need to loosen up slightly when their children are younger and still living at home, and then maintain contact, and develop solid relationships with their grown children once they leave home. By the time their sons hit their teen years, many mothers have been pushed aside to facilitate their coming to manhood. A boy must, we hear constantly, let go of her apron strings and bond with his father, the epitome of masculinity. But mothers are no less necessary in the lives of their teenage boys than they were when he was in diapers. If mothers represent compassion, empathy, love, and nurturance, he will need those qualities in abundance.

And fathers are equally vital. I've heard too many stories of fathers—even those who have been involved in their sons' early lives—who begin to distance themselves once their sons navigate, seemingly successfully, through puberty and adolescence. More than one college guy has had the experience that Josh, a 21-year-old junior at a small elite New England college had. "I know it's a goddamned cliché," he told me, "but I swear to God, I called home last weekend and my dad answered, and I said 'Hey Dad, how are you?' and he said—I swear—'Hold on, I'll get your mother.' I couldn't believe it." It's not that fathers are absent in the literal sense, but many begin to detach emotionally once they've completed their "work" in raising a son who has managed to survive adolescence without becoming a drug addict, a felon, or a victim of some other felon!

Other fathers are more complacent, identifying with their sons' behaviors, perhaps recalling their own adolescent missteps. We know that we did some of the same crazy things, took some of the same insane risks, and we came through it okay. So let the boy sow his wild oats, make his own mistakes. There's no harm. Some even overidentify and become complicit.

We need to enable our sons (and daughters) to be resilient, to be

able to withstand some of the temptations of Guyland, to develop and trust their own moral compass so they can navigate the more treacherous waters and emerge as healthy adult men and women. We need to support them as they find and test their own internal voices of resistance and individuality, with a sense of honor and integrity on which others can rely.

Part of it, as I said, has to come from parents. But parents cannot do it alone. Part of that help has to come from the communities in which we live. As a society, we must be active, engaged, and interventionist, helping America's guys find a path of emotional authenticity, moral integrity, and physical efficacy, and thereby ease themselves more readily into an adulthood in which they can truly stand tall. We can—and must—empower boys to be more than complicit bystanders. We can help just *guys* to become *just* guys.

Typically, we assume that this can be approached solely by psychological interventions, by counseling boys to find a moral center, encouraging their resilience, providing adequate role models and clear messages. These are all necessary, but they are not enough. They assume that by helping the boys find their way out of Guyland, the social and cultural frameworks that sustain and encourage it will simply atrophy from a lack of participants. Starved of individuals willing to play along, the game will end.

While salutary, such efforts put the cart before the horse, ignoring the social and cultural mechanisms that sustain Guyland and underlie its persistence. Confronting Guyland does not turn guys into a gaggle of wimps but a generation of men—able to do the right thing, to stand up and be counted, to fear only their own fears of not fitting in, of being bullied and cowed into submission.

Getting Inside Guyland

In this book, I draw on thirty years of experience in education, thirty years of talking with tens of thousands of college and high-school men. I've given lectures and conducted workshops at nearly 300 colleges and universities and nearly 100 high schools in the United States, and

perhaps another 100 at universities abroad. I've conducted research at the nation's military academies, and I've worked with dozens of athletic teams and fraternities. I became well acquainted with Guyland at Virginia Military Institute and The Citadel, and also at the University of Colorado, when I served as an expert witness in court cases involving those schools.

As a sociologist, my field of expertise, the study of men and masculinity, is a relatively new subfield of the study of "gender." It provides a different vantage point from that usually taken by psychologists who write about men and boys. I base my work not on the experiences of the guys who come to see me as patients or clients, as a therapist might. While such stories are rich with detail, sociologists always find it less persuasive to generalize from therapy patients: what about the guys who *aren't* in therapy? We need to hear both the stories behind the statistics and the statistics themselves, the large general patterns of behavior and the individual ways that guys navigate their way through Guyland.

My research for *Guyland* has taken me to just about every state in the country, to dorm rooms and fraternity lounges, local bars and restaurants, tailgate parties, truck stops, and billiard parlors. Some guys I've interviewed online, others on the phone, and still others in chat rooms. With several colleagues, I've participated in one of the largest-ever studies of campus sexual behavior. And I've organized and run focus groups of gamers, online gamblers, porn watchers, and sports junkies to hear them talk to each other about their hobbies and obsessions.

The book brings together psychological insights into these guys' interior anguish and a sociological analysis of what larger social forces have brought them to this state. Guys tell me that they feel they are making up the rules as they go along, with neither adequate adult guidance nor appropriate road maps, and, at the same time, that they feel they are playing by rules that someone else invented and which they don't fully understand. This book explores that contradiction.

Let me make it clear: Most of the guys I meet are good guys, searching earnestly for a way to carve out a life for themselves that has meaning and integrity. But far too many are easily influenced by the bullies and the big shots, the guys who think they are making up the rules and,

in any event, are the most committed to enforcing them. Many guys are simply too afraid of being taken for a wimp, and so they oblige, unwittingly perpetuating Guyland, and preventing themselves from breaking free.

Guyland sells most guys a bill of goods telling them that a constellation of behaviors are the distilled essence of manhood, which could not be farther from the truth. We need, collectively and individually, in our relationships and families, schools and churches, shopping malls and freeways, to enable young guys to see through the facade and navigate a path toward adulthood. We need to turn the world back, right side up.

They're counting on it. In order to love young men, to be compassionate about their world and their choices, we need, as a society, to look at Guyland squarely, to no longer turn a blind eye to their world and resign ourselves to boys just being boys. They are counting on us being involved in that now-expanded transition from adolescence to adulthood.

And, as the father of a 9-year-old boy, I'm counting on it too. My young son encompasses a full range of emotions—aggressive and competitive, emotionally alert and empathic, capable of flights of giddy sensitivity and gross-out fart jokes. And yet I know—and can already see—Guyland is waiting on the horizon. Guyland is looming in the occasional comments by classmates and friends about cooties and what boys and girls can and cannot do, and in the teasing and shoving that often accompanies any expression of compassion or care.

And yet my son reminds me every day of the poverty of that resigned statement that "boys will be boys." He—and all our boys—will be people. And, with our help, they will also become men—the kind of men whose families and communities can truly be proud of and admire.