



from the April 07, 2006 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0407/p20s01-ussc.html>

Backstory: Manly man? Girly man? Oh, *man!*

By [Daniel B. Wood](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

LOS ANGELES - I was skipping down the sidewalk, sipping a wheat-grass smoothie when it happened. A Ray-Banned redhead in a BMW convertible screeched right into my path out of the Taco Bell drive-through. Her back bumper grazed my kneecap as black soot coughed from the exhaust pipe into my pant cuffs. She gunned her engine and headed down Ventura Boulevard.

It was the 2006 equivalent of the 1950s sand-in-your-face insult that drove a generation of 90-pound weaklings to sign up with muscleman Charles Atlas. And it was clear to me: I apparently needed to ratchet up my manliness.

Instead of the old-school male fantasy phone booth where I might tear off my shirt for a red-on-gold "S" (for Superman), I ducked into the new age, sensitive-male reality of Borders for a book-on-rack "S" (for self help).

Fortunately, O: The Oprah magazine, several national newspaper articles, and at least four new books are speaking directly to me - and millions of manliness-challenged American men. It turns out that the postfeminist sensitive male thing has gone a tad too far. Getting in touch with your inner wild man (or inner child, or inner woman) is as out of style as a medieval hairshirt. Even the "metrosexual" seems to be more five minutes ago than the phrase "five minutes ago," or at least not market enough for Condé Nast, which just pulled the plug on "Cargo," the men's shopping and lifestyle magazine that catered to the well-moisturized and accessorized urban male.

Neither man-zine, nor makeover TV ("Queer Eye for the Straight Guy") - nor even man-diatribes ("Are Men Necessary?" by Maureen Dowd) - have been able to undo the ubiquitous *hominus-doofus* image that American husbands and fathers continue to endure in such sitcoms as "Everybody Loves Raymond," "King of Queens," and "George Lopez."

Working up steam, I ordered a venti latte (extra foam) from Borders's in-store coffee bar. Then I searched the stacks for something to help me transcend Archie Bunker Man without sliding too far toward the Richard Simmons/Liberace end of the continuum. Something current yet Greatest Generation-ish.

Yet another redefinition of masculinity seems to be in order - and it seems to involve a return to a fork in the road, say several new books.

"We are seeing a lot of books and articles by men [saying] they feel confident with a return to older, more traditional roles," says Elayne Rapping, a cultural sociologist at the State University of New York at Buffalo. "Reactionary" and "backlash" are terms that figure into her description of the new quest for gender clarity.

But forget sending away for dumbbells. Bigger muscles are not going to get back what Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, Margaret Thatcher, and other über-females have taken from men. On the surface, the situation sounds a lot like the same search for alternatives that brought men in droves to wilderness retreats in the early 1990s with white-maned poet and "Iron John" author Robert Bly.

But the new clarion call is for a more measured, less macho masculinity than Mr. Bly's wild swampster, and less girly man than ABC's string of overweening "Bachelor" options. The shelves seem to say, "take back some of the male assertiveness you lost, and drop the 'wipe-your-feet-here' end off the emotional sensitivity meter."

Regaining gender clarity requires "a forward twist on an old idea," suggests Harvard Prof. Harvey C. Mansfield, author of the new book "Manliness." His celebrate-the-difference philosophy advocates men and women returning to traditional roles in the private sphere (girls dust/cook, guys fix/mow) - but not in public life (both can "rule" from mailroom to boardroom by universal strengths and less by gender-specific traits: male/aggressive, female/passive.)

Mr. Mansfield's book is not surprisingly the one raising the most whines from the left and praise from the right on the talk-show and book-tour circuit - and a "who-knew?" endorsement from the O magazine. He says the gender-neutral society - the ostensible aim of feminism - has come at the expense of male-female relationships, at work and at home. He calls for a refinement of the discussion of manliness to balance positive and negative: lose the caddish, harassing, and brutal facets but keep elements of honor, chivalry, and gentlemanliness.

"Manliness can't be repressed because it is in our nature," Mansfield says.

Frank Vincent who has played tough guys in "Raging Bull" and "The Sopranos" has a blunter assessment: "The women of the world are overrunning the guys," he says. In the past two decades, he says, "men got in touch with their sensitive side and gave away too much in the process."

As he sees it: Women in every avenue of life are calling the shots - in malls and restaurants, at the symphony and sporting events - while men smile and nod like a dashboard bobblehead doll. His antidote, "A Guy's Guide to Being a Man's Man," is as full of practical tips as Mansfield's is devoid of them. He reminds men exactly how to behave with honor, respect, and gentlemanliness. That includes dating ("don't look too eager"), dressing ("no ties with animals, Looney Tune characters, or Spongebob."), dining ("order New York strip steak for three"), and listening to "man's man" music ("Sinatra was the ultimate"). His formula for men in 2006 is to get a manicure (but no pedicure), money clip (no Velcro wallets), and a DVD of "Saving Private Ryan."

The author of another recent book, "The Secrets of Happily Married Men," was even more emphatic. "There is a backlash against the idea that the ideal man has to be feminized in some way," says Scott Haltzman. A longtime couples counselor, he says he has seen the damage to men who try to go down the touchy-feely road, especially when it's against their will, from the impetus of their wives.

"My experience has been that many men have tried to be more expressive and get in touch with their inner emotions but failed, and then felt there was something wrong with them," he says.

My own experience is that when I spent too much time with my inner woman, my wife felt there was something wrong with *herself*, and got jealous of the "other woman." I should have taken Haltzman's advice: "Let men be good at what they do, and teach women to better appreciate that."

I couldn't handle much more, but a fourth book I came across - a bit older - leapt out at me: "The Man's No-Nonsense Guide to Women: How to Succeed in Romance on Planet Earth." Author Marc Rudov contends that men and women are virtually the same and want the same things. He worries that too much male chivalry - wining and dining, holding the door, paying for every meal - is a kind of benevolent sexism in which both man and woman can feel like commodities.

It is "condescension with a wink and a smile," says Mr. Rudov. "Smart women and smart men don't want to dominate or be dominated."

It was all clearer to me now ... sort of. Move forward by going back. I left the bookstore in search of the Ray-Banned redhead in a BMW convertible. I haven't found her yet, but I've been playing Sinatra's "My Way" to inspire my manly comeback: "Excuse me ma'am. How'd you like to transcend stereotype with me while we explore frankly the soot you left in my cuff?"

[Full HTML version of this story which may include photos, graphics, and related links](#)

www.csmonitor.com | Copyright © 2006 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.

For permission to reprint/republish this article, please email [Copyright](#)