

Boy Crazy: Remembering Adolescence, Therapies and Dreams

Janet Sayers
London and New York: Routledge, 1998

Reviewed by Nancy Backes

Anglican and American cultures are boy crazy, as Janet Sayers convincingly argues in her most recent book. In support of her conclusions Sayers, a practicing psychoanalyst in London, draws on fictions, as well as the stories of patients, friends and colleagues, and graduate, undergraduate, and secondary school students. To her credit, Sayers treats all stories as representations of truth. Indeed, Sayers implicitly states her faith in the primacy of story and notes the disasters, such as schizophrenia and suicide, that erupt when the story cannot be told and the truth cannot surface. Sayers uses these stories to elucidate the destruction and unhappiness of our “boy crazy” culture. And in the end she theorizes how “girl sanity” might supplant boy craziness, although this is no self-help book.

Change will come from a return to the improperly resolved conflicts of adolescence, the source of the “intensification of masculinity.” For in these adolescent conflicts, Sayers argues, boy craziness—male valorization—takes root and sustains our androcentric culture. Crucial to our understanding, she says, is an examination of adolescent boys’ internal conflicts, which Sayers points out, are particularly acute. Adolescent boys experience divisions of mind and body, truth and falsehood, past and present, fantasy and reality, love and sex—in short, conflicts that are internal. Adolescent girls, on the other hand, experience a love and hate division toward their mothers and others—conflicts more external and relational. Girls simultaneously see their mothers as gender models and as having achieved but secondary status in the world, cause for both celebration and resentment on their parts for their becoming like their mothers. Both sexes, however, escape the torment of these divisions through, as Sayers puts it, “‘boy crazily’ aggrandising themselves or others as gods, heroes, or saviors” (104). Boys look to heroes: rock stars and superheroes, or fantasize themselves as heroes, thus firmly reinforcing male-dominated culture; girls look to romance with boys as a way out of their conflicting feelings, thus reinforcing male-dominated culture.

The men in Sayers’s study report their great distress at being separated from their mothers in childhood, usually around the age of eight, when many were sent to boarding school. Their distress is great enough to carry with them all their lives; Sayers’s observation here questions conventional wisdom purveyed by thinkers such as Freud, Jung, and Peter Blos who insist that separation

from the mother is necessary for the development of masculine identity. (The flaws in Sayers's book—a general lack of racial, cultural, and class distinctions; ignoring cultural institutions; a failure to include the subjectivity of the mother; flabby sentences, despite the graceful transitions between ideas—pale in comparison to this courageous challenge.) Once the relational union with the mother is rent, the sense of division between authenticity and inauthenticity, mind and body, develops and persists. In adolescence, for instance, boys resist emotional expression, which they associate with their mothers, in favor of expression of action: yet another splitting. Some psychoanalysts, however, notably John Bowlby, D. W. Winnicott, and Wilfred Bion, stress the importance of the child's emotional closeness to the mother, and her role in receiving, converting, and containing all that is frightening to him, much as Sayers advocates therapists do.

Awareness of the conflicts, followed by re-integration of the extreme, conflicting emotions—re-containing them—is the key for therapists and others. In adulthood, this enables the telling of a new story based on a newly integrated past. The result will be community and closeness rather than individuals divided from themselves. For in the place of an androcentric society's valorization of false gods, heroes, and saviors, new feminist therapies and their resulting stories will locate the mother: a mother from whom it is not necessary to separate spiritually, socially, and psychically.

Girl Rearing: Memoir of a Girlhood Gone Astray

Marcia Aldrich
New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1998

Reviewed by Marion Gold

Every word in Marcia Aldrich's memoir holds the promise that girlhood and growing up to maturity in a gendered, segmented society will be a struggle. Yet there is a note of sweetness about the innocence of childhood spent at the bottom of the garden, secreted away from prying adult eyes. This is the tale of a mother thwarted by her last child, a daughter who will not be molded into conformity.

Aldrich exposes women's rites de passage of marriage and child rearing in the 50s as devoid of meaning and through her expressive language, holds it up for readers to contemplate but not to ridicule. These women, not unlike her mother, ensconced in their cages of conformity, sought to imprison their daughters within those same narrow confines.

From the inauspicious circumstances of her birth in the alley, in the back