The Mama's Boy Myth: Why Keeping Our Sons Close Makes Them Stronger

Kate Stone Lombardi.
New York: Penguin Group, 2012.

REVIEWED BY KERRI KEARNEY

The sheer number of women mothering boys should make creating "a safe space" to share common experiences unnecessary, but, as Kate Stone Lombardi notes, "the mother-son relationship has become the only parent-child combination in which closeness is viewed so critically and with such suspicion" (19). While ongoing social critique may have silenced mothers of boys, according to Lombardi it has not stopped significant shifts in their thinking and maternal practice. Those changes are presented throughout *The Mama's Boy Myth*, which is practical, readable, and well-resourced.

Much of the early part of the book discusses masculinity and accepted societal "wisdom" about raising boys—identified by Lombardi as an "old narrative." Chapter two, "The Pink and Blue Divide," addresses faulty assumptions about gender differences and describes, somewhat shockingly, at least one psychiatric nurse with a specialty in "gender disappointment counseling" whose clients are primarily mothers of boys.

Lombardi also addresses the current "boy crisis" (possibly the result of an overzealous media), emotional intelligence in the work place, and Freud's Oedipus theory. The term "neurosexism" (the false belief that male brains and female brains are hardwired for rational thought and empathy, respectively) is briefly introduced. Although the author mentions the distinction between sex and gender only once, the message is clear throughout her study that biological sex is designated by chromosomes and anatomy while gender is a cultural concept made up of behaviours we associate with males and females.

Multiple studies are cited that show a boy's close relationship with his mother leads to positive outcomes, such as delayed sexual activity, emotional openness, increased academic engagement, and the avoidance of alcohol and/or drugs. Lombardi focuses on the mother-son bond, but she acknowledges fathers as a separate and equally important resource for raising healthy men. For the author, "the concept of manhood is malleable and must be viewed within the context of history and popular culture."

I laughed out loud when the topic of boys and puberty was introduced in chapter six—"every time I began to write, the words seemed laden with sexual innuendo. Here are a few examples of sentences that quickly met the delete

button: 'Puberty is when things really come to a head.' 'This is when things really get hard'" (193)—and I nodded in agreement when Lombardi discusses sports: "some psychologists have argued that sports provide the safest way for men to express their emotions in our current social climate—men can jump up and down in excitement, they can get tearful in victory and defeat, not to mention have permission to hug, smack each other's butts, jump in piles on each other, and otherwise physically and emotionally connect with other men" (216). Lombardi suggests that "car talk" is a viable way to discuss difficult subjects with boys.

The author's overarching message is that most women raise boys in similar ways, but in silent and parallel universes. She depicts mothers as valuable and underutilized resources who can help boys become men capable of functioning in today's world. Mothers also are presented as largely rational, thoughtful, and loving beings who feel "strongly that they [are] creating more sensitive, caring men for the next generation of women." This may be a generalization, but here, for once, mothers of boys are represented positively.

Reaching One Thousand: A Story of Love, Motherhood and Autism

Rachel Robertson.
Collingwood, Victoria, Australia: Black, 2012.

REVIEWED BY ALISON QUAGGIN HARKIN

When one of my sons was diagnosed with autism and a cognitive disability, I became fascinated with memoirs by mothers whose children had autism or other disabilities. Many of these memoirs were moving, but, after I had read a few, I began to notice a certain sameness to the narrative arc. They tended to present a linear journey, during which the author overcomes multiple challenges to become a super mom who devotes her life to her child, no matter what the cost to herself. Both the linearity and the sense of "overcoming" did not feel like the truth—or at least not the only truth.

Rachel Robertson's beautifully written *Reaching One Thousand: A Story of Love, Motherhood and Autism* offers a very different kind of narrative. In an introduction and twelve personal essays, she explores ways of understanding autism, her own life, and her autistic child, whom she calls Ben (not his real name). In addition, Robertson, who teaches professional writing and publishing at Curtin University in Western Australia, reflects on the process of writ-