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What makes a man?

A review of The Male Brain

Brizendine, L. (2010). *The Male Brain*. New York: Broadway Books.

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What makes a man? For a neurobiologist, not too much more than hormones. Dr. Louann Brizendine, a medical doctor with a specialty in neurobiology, dissects men in her latest book, *The Male Brain*, having taken on women in 2006. For Brizendine, it's all nature, no nurture; her neuropsychiatric perspective has a way of reducing men to that which can be proven clinically. While this approach has its shortcomings, she simultaneously offers a fresh alternative to the current gender neutral vision espoused by most women's studies departments. The reality is that what she presents as groundbreaking science is oftentimes common sense. *The Male Brain* may well be the "brain's eye view of male behaviour." It's just that as anyone's experience will tell, there's more to life than one organ.

Each chapter covers men at a different stage in their biological development. Starting with a chapter entitled "The Boy Brain" and ending with "The Mature Male Brain," Brizendine explains the hormonal influences in the brain using stories of her patients and neuroscientific theories that address specific behaviors.

Biology may well explain why a five-year-old boy chooses "masculine toys" at playtime or why a man feels attracted to a specific woman. But accountability in human relationship means taking more than hormones into account. Take John for example, 58 years old and recently divorced. He is uncertain about a new relationship with Kate, a woman only 6 years older than his own daughter.

Certainly, caution might be advised; even adult children experience hardship after a divorce, and finding out your new step-mom belongs to your peer group might be the relational equivalent of a sucker punch. Regardless, Brizendine the neurobiologist explains that John's decision to be with Kate will help him avoid loneliness—a condition that is purposefully painful, she says, so that humans will avoid it. Starting a new family at a grandfather's age? Why, it's a great way to "biologically pair-bond." Brizendine then tosses in the fact that married men live longer, if only by 1.7 years.

Turning to her explanation of why adolescent boys are prone to tuning out female voices, Brizendine uses a study which examines both male and female brain activity as the subjects listen to both music and white noise. The results shows that the male subjects' brains

deactivate while hearing the white noise. So why can't 14-year-old Jake quite follow his friend Zoe's chatter? Testosterone! Testosterone causes him to interpret the cadence and acoustic of the female voice as white noise. Mothers across Canada will be relieved to know there's a scientific reason why their teen sons aren't listening.

In the chapter "The Daddy Brain," Brizendine tells the story of a recently married couple, Tim and Michelle, and their experience of an unexpected first pregnancy. Tim's initial reaction is panic but this quickly subsides. Brizendine posits that Tim's rapid acceptance of fatherhood is the result of a biological process hardwired into the male genetic makeup which forces Tim's testosterone levels to decrease, while amping up the production of so-called "fathering hormones" such as prolactin and oxytocin. This hormonal equation amounts to what Brizendine calls the "unbreakable biological bond between parent and child."

Certainly, some research shows that biological parenthood is a special bond. But then there's also the magic of a little piece of paper called marriage. Social science shows the children of married parents fare better on various outcome measures than those merely living together. So clearly it's more than hormones or biology alone that does the trick. If it were only hormones, perhaps 81 per cent of single parent households would not be headed by women, as is currently the case. [1] Simply put, a discussion of neurohormones cannot explain the widespread social dislocation currently affecting the family unit.

This is where Brizendine's scientific explanations intersects with our hedonistic culture: We started a divorce revolution on notions that children are resilient and happiness for adults can be pursued through a new start—a new spouse—in life. Commitment and responsibility? Old-fashioned. But John might not be so happy with Kate, his new, young love in five year's time, and what then? John can certainly get a new wife. He can't, however, get a new self.

To be fair, it's not the role of a neurobiologist to assess cultural influences, social science, or the spiritual side of happiness. For what it is, Brizendine's book is fine, if simplistic—science with a candy-coated veneer. Certainly, our culture gives Brizendine brisk business: We refuse the wisdom of the ages, having traded it in for a measured scientific approach to every aspect of life.

Given this reality, it is good news that science and statistics confirm what our grandmothers knew all along: men and women are different and they think and act in different ways. Political philosopher Harvey Mansfield and author of *Manliness* puts it this way; "In the case of manliness, the sciences on a whole confirm common sense; they generally repeat the common-sense view that the sexes differ: men more aggressive, women more caring." Since our culture appears to have forgotten this, perhaps Brizendine can be forgiven for framing her work as revolutionary.

Endnotes

[1] Canadian Council on Social Development. (2006). The Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006. Retrieved June 3, 2010 from http://www.ccsd.ca/pccy/2006/pdf/pccy_2006.pdf