***Putting Down the Gun***

Rebecca Walker

In the following excerpt from her introduction to the essay collection *What Makes a Man: 22 Writers Imagine the Future* (2004), Rebecca Walker, journalist, activist, and author of the memoir *Black White Jewish*, looks at the pressures boy experience to conform to certain societal expectations.

The idea for this book was born one night after a grueling conversation with my then eleven-year-old son. He had come home from his progressive middle school unnaturally quiet and withdrawn, shrugging off my questions of concern with uncharacteristic irritability. Where was the sunny, chatty boy I dropped off that morning? What had befallen him in the perilous halls of middle school? I backed off but kept a close eye on him, watching for clues.

After a big bowl of his favorite pasta, he sat on a sofa in my study and read his science textbook as I wrote at my desk. We both enjoyed this simple yet profound togetherness, the two of us focused on our own projects yet palpably connected. As we worked under the soft glow of paper lanterns, with the heat on high and our little dog snoring at his feet, my son began to relax. I could feel a shift as he began to remember, deep in his body, that he was home, that he was safe, that he didn’t have to brace to protect himself from the expectations of the outside world.

An hour or so passed like this before he announced that he had a question. He had morphed back into the child I knew, and was lying down with a colorful blanket over his legs, using one hand to scratch behind the dog’s ears. “I’ve been thinking that maybe I should play sports at school.”

“Sports?” I replied with surprise, swiveling around and leaning back in my chair. “Any sport in mind, or just sports in general?”

A non-chalant shrug. “Maybe softball, I like softball.”

I cocked my head to one side. “What brought this on?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe girls will like me if I play sports.”

Excuse me?

My boy is intuitive, smart, and creative beyond belief. At the time he loved animals, Japanese anime, the rap group Dead Prez, and everything having to do with snowboarding. He liked to help both his grandmothers in the garden. He liked to read science fiction. He liked to climb into bed with me and lay his head on my chest. He liked to build vast and intricate cities with his Legos and was beginning what I thought would be a lifelong love affair with chess.

Maybe girls would like him if he played sports?

Call me extreme, but I felt like my brilliant 11-year-old daughter had come home and said, “Maybe boys will like me if I stop talking in class.” Or my gregarious African-American son had told me, “Maybe the kids will like me if I act white.”

I tried to stay calm as he illuminated the harsh realities of his sixth-grade social scene. In a nutshell, the girls liked the jocks the best and sometimes deigned to give the time of day to the other team, the computer nerds. Since he wasn’t allowed to play violent computer games—we forbade them in our house—he was having trouble securing his place with the latter, hence his desire to assume the identity of the former. When I asked about making friends based on common interests rather than superficial categories, he got flustered. “You don’t understand,” he said huffily. “Boys talk about sports, like their matches and who scored what and stuff, or they talk about new versions of computer games or tricks they learned to get to higher levels.” Tears welled up in his eyes. “I don’t have anything to talk about.”

He was right; until that moment I had had no idea, but suddenly the truth of being a sixth-grade boy in America crystallized before me. My beautiful boy and every other mother’s beautiful boy had what essentially boiled down to two options: fight actually in sport, or fight virtually on the computer. Athlete, gladiator, secret agent. The truth of his existence, his many likes and dislikes, none of them having to do with winning or killing of any kind, had no social currency. My son could compete and score, perform and win, or be an outcast or worse, invisible, his unique gifts unnoticed and unharvested, the world around him that much more impoverished.

That night I went to sleep with several things on my mind: the conversation I planned to have with the head of my son’s school about the need for a comprehensive, curricular interrogation of the contours of masculinity; the way girls find themselves drawn to more “traditional” displays of masculinity because they are more unsure than ever about how to experience their own femininity; and the many hours and endless creativity I would have to devoted to ensuring that my son’s true self would not be entirely snuffed out by the cultural imperative.

And then there was the final and most chilling thought of all:

A bat, a “joystick.” What’s next, a gun?

It occurred to me that my son was being primed for war, was being prepared to pick up a gun. The first steps were clear: Tell him that who he is authentically is not enough; tell him that he will not be loved unless he abandons his own desires and picks up a tool of competition; tell him that to really be of value he must stand ready to compete, dominate, and, if necessary, kill, if not actually, then virtually, financially, athletically.

If one’s life purpose is obscured by the pressure to conform to a generic type and other traces of self are ostracized into shadow, then just how difficult is it to pick up a gun, metaphoric or literal, as a means of self-definition, as a way of securing what feels like personal power?

If I didn’t get it that night, I got it after talking with all of the men who were willing to write or share their stories for this book: There is a war being waged on boys, and it starts before they are even born. It is a war against vulnerability, creativity, individuality, and the mysterious unknown. It is a war against tenderness, empathy, grief, fear, longing, and feeling itself. In its determination to annihilate the authentic self, it is a war against peace.

Over the last two years every man I know shared his own version of the same basic story: a few years filled with wonder and freedom cut short by the subtle and not-so-subtle demands of being a man; a sudden and often violent reduction of individuality into a single version of boyhood.

In what seemed like a moment but what was actually a slow buildup over time, an insidious and deceptively gradual occupation of psychic territory, young men were expected to change, to follow spoken and unspoken cues: don’t feel, take control, be physically strong, find your identity in money and work, do not be afraid to kill, distrust everything that you cannot see. Don’t cry.

**Questions:**

1. What is the thesis of this article? That is, what is the author trying to argue?
2. Do you agree with this statement: “My beautiful boy and every other mother’s beautiful boy had what essentially boiled down to two options: fight actually in sport, or fight virtually on the computer” (para. 13)? Why?
3. If the author’s observations and conclusions are correct, why should we as a society be worried? How would these societal roles affect boys later in life?