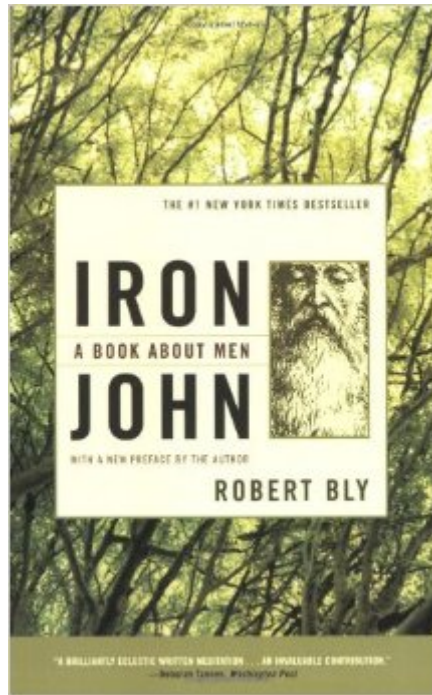


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Iron John: A Book About Men



Synopsis

In this deeply learned book, poet and translator Robert Bly offers nothing less than a new vision of what it is to be a man. Bly's vision is based on his ongoing work with men and reflections on his own life. He addresses the devastating effects of remote fathers and mourns the disappearance of male initiation rites in our culture. Finding rich meaning in ancient stories and legends, Bly uses the Grimm fairy tale "Iron John," in which the narrator, or "Wild Man," guides a young man through eight stages of male growth, to remind us of archetypes long forgotten—images of vigorous masculinity, both protective and emotionally centered. Simultaneously poetic and down-to-earth, combining the grandeur of myth with the practical and often painful lessons of our own histories, Iron John is a rare work that will continue to guide and inspire men—and women—for years to come.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book has been well summarized and reviewed, but here are a few hints to those considering buying it. (1) This is not a work of academic sociology. Do not come to Iron John for suggestions about social policy for your dissertation or articles. He does not regard professors as intellectuals, but rather puts them in the same category as businessmen or others trapped on soulless career tracks. Creative people are driven from academe quite early, in grad school, and Bly knows it. (2) This is a suggestive, exploratory, poetic attempt to use myth as a form of guidance for people in their real lives. That is, Bly seems more interested in throwing out powerful images and myths concerning men and men's lives and trying to make sense of them within our context of

media-saturated consciousness than he is in traditional academic argument. It's an alternative to academic approaches, not in competition with them, and that is partly what makes it so wonderful: we're free to grasp at what interests us and leave what doesn't. Swimming in the questions is a beautiful thing. (3) Bly was an old 60s activist. If you can't bear the thought of someone not being conservative then don't read Bly. If, like me, you're conservative but not Republican, you'll be fine. (4) Having spent ten years in academe before running, screaming, in the opposite direction, I can tell you that Bly is no kow-towing feminist and no victimologist. Anyone who thinks Bly is too feminist needs to be stranded in a Women's Studies department for an afternoon. Then you'll come to him begging forgiveness. Bly is too careful of the feminists, I agree, but they're after him every step of the way trying to shut him up. He's despised by gender fascists, who see him as an advocate of violence against women.

Robert Bly explores the wild man, the king of the animals, the hairy man, in this expanded exploration of the Grimm's fairy tale of Iron John. Bly makes careful and thoughtful connections between the hairy underwater Iron John and the images of John the Baptist, the wild hairy man of Christianity. One especially helpful aspect of Bly's analysis is that it is through a wound that the male is reborn. Connecting this concept to the birth of Dionysus from the thigh of Zeus, he indicates that all men carry a wound from their boyhood and it is by the passing through this wound on to the other side that the man is initiated and becomes whole in his own masculinity and adulthood. Men are often wounded by their fathers during childhood and thus have deep buried feelings of not being good enough to meet the father's expectations or memories of acting foolishly in front of the father. Bly would say that the story of Iron John is that men must find the hidden wild man within them that guides them through the wound into adulthood. The wild man, the hairy man, Iron John, thus becomes a second father and initiates the young man into the world of adult masculinity. In Bly's conception, men must move beyond the wounded state and must explore the wound and move beyond it to be able to experience the full power of masculinity and adulthood. We have all known men who are the sons of smart, wealthy, talented men and the very brilliance, success, and abilities of the father wounds the son. The son is wounded because he will never be as honest, or as giving, or as respected, or as accomplished, or as wealthy, or as famous as their father. Being the son of a successful man is in itself a wounding process.

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