



MAUREEN DOWD

*Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for
The New York Times*

ARE MEN NECESSARY?

When Sexes Collide



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MAUREEN DOWD





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ALSO BY MAUREEN DOWD

*Bushworld:
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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

For men

Friends and more, past, present and future.

You know who you are.

• Acknowledgments •

I want, first, to thank my mom, *mo cuishle*, who taught me that true beauty is achieved by helping those less fortunate and who long ago advised me, when I was feeling blue or self-doubting about men, that the best thing to do was go out and buy a red lipstick or a red dress.

“It will be your red badge of courage,” she said.

Peggy Dowd was a man’s woman, a woman’s woman and a mom of moms, a queen of vitality who died at a luminous ninety-seven just as I finished this book, after living through history that spanned the 1912 crash of the *Titanic* to the 2001 crash of the Twin Towers.

I’m beholden to three of the most remarkable women I’ve ever known; my sister, Peggy, and my nieces, Jennifer and Dana.

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• Contents •

Introduction |

One • HOW TO SET YOUR BEAR TRAP IN THE
MINK DEPARTMENT OF BERGDORF'S 15

Two • WHY PANDORA'S BOX IS NO TENDER TRAP 77

Three • WHIPPING THE PANTS OFF THE WOMEN
WHO WEAR THEM 89

Four • WHY THE WELL-HUNG Y IS WILTING,
EVEN AS THE X IS EXCELLING 135

Five • OF PUSSYCATS, BOOTY CALLS, ROAD BEEF
AND SLUMP BUSTERS 167

Six • THE DRAG OF GOING STAG 191

Seven • WHENCE THE WINCE? 211

Eight • HOW GREEN IS MY VALLEY OF THE DOLLS 257

Nine • HOW HILLARY SMUSHED CUPCAKES
AND FILLETED FEMINISM 269

• Introduction •



don't understand men.

I don't even understand what I don't understand about men.

They're a most inscrutable bunch, really.

I had a moment of dazzling clarity when I was twenty-seven, a rush of confidence that I had cracked the code. But it was, alas, an illusion.

I think I overcomplicated their simplicity. Or oversimplified their simplicity. Are they as complicated as a pile of wood? Or as simple as a squid?

I was loath to accept the premise of Jerry Seinfeld, who claims that "men are really nothing more than extremely advanced dogs" who want the same thing from their women that

ARE MEN NECESSARY?

they want from their underwear: "A little bit of support and a little bit of freedom."

I was more prone to go with the thesis of James Thurber and E. B. White in their seminal 1929 treatise, *Is Sex Necessary?*² that the American male was the least understood of all male animals, and that more attention needed to be paid to his complexity—"the importance of what he is thinking about and what he intends to do, or at least what he would like to do. . . .

"How often do you hear it said that the little whims and desires of a man should be cherished, or even listened to? You don't hear it said at all. What you do hear is that 'the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.' A thing like that hardens a man. He may eat his spinach and say nothing, but he is being hardened just the same."

Thurber and White don't date the start of the troubles between men and women to the snaky Eve.

They contend that things got bollixed up in the 1920s, when the female, "face-to-face with the male's simple desire to sit down and hold her" (aka "the attack of the male"), retaliated with irritating Diversion Subterfuges—such as Fudge Making and Indoor Games for groups—meant to fend off and put Man in his place.

"The American male's repugnance to charades, which is equaled, perhaps, by his repugnance to nothing at all, goes back to those years," the authors explained.

I know women are disorienting to men, too.

In his memoir about *The New Yorker*, *The Years with Ross*,

Thurber tells this story from the early '30s about the legendary editor's reaction to having a baby girl:

"One morning, I found Ross, worried and stoop-shouldered, pacing a corridor, jingling those pocket coins. He came right out with his current anxiety. 'Goddamn it, I can't think of any *man* that has a daughter. I think of men as having boys, and women as having girls.'

" 'I have a daughter,' I said, 'and I wanted a daughter.'

" 'That's not natural, is it?' he demanded. 'I never heard of a man that didn't want a son. Can you name any, well, you know, goddamn it—terribly masculine men with daughters?'

"The sun and moon of reassurance shone in his face when I came up with 'Jack Dempsey has two children, both girls.' His day was saved from the wreckage of despair, but he still had one final depressed word. 'Goddamn it, I hate the idea of going around with female hormones in me.' "

In the final analysis, Thurber and White decided matters went irretrievably awry during the Jazz Age when flappers began to imitate men, smoking, drinking, wanting to earn money ("not much, but some") and thinking they had "the right to be sexual." All these strained attempts at equality, they contend, destroyed the mystery of the sexual tango, or sexual Charleston, if you will.

This spurt of cocky independence faded, and over the decades women lapsed back into domesticity and deference, until their only avatars were perfect gingham moms such as Donna Reed, June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson.

Then came the Sexual Revolution. When I entered college,