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Defending Boyhood

Here are some notes from Anthony Esolen's book, *Defending Boyhood*. They're scattershot, partly because Hoopla's highlighting system isn't as good as Amazon's:

On shining your Sunday shoes:

"Boys who loved football did it, and boys who didn't love football but rather army weapons or hunting or roaming the woods or something else did it; all the boys had shiny shoes. It was a thing to do, to be like your father."

This comes up several times in the book: **boys act like the men they admire**.

"The boy naturally looks toward certain kinds of men, who will grant him the liberty of intellectual and spiritual combat, to dispute and fight about the highest things. It has all the delight of a game, with rules, and the wonder of a search into mysteries." One argument for sex-segregated schooling. [#education](#)

"Boys seek out men because men will allow for the combat, which can be fierce, and often ought to be fierce, but which need not result in hard feelings. Often it results in fast friendships. Men allow for the arena, the space that is safe in *not* being safe. Safety kills."

"The boy does not simply grow into manhood, for manhood is a cultural reality built upon a biological foundation, rather than womanhood, a biological reality with cultural expression... At any moment of a man's life, his manhood is subject to trial, to be won, again and again, to be confirmed or to be canceled. A man can lose forever his right to stand beside other men. He can fall to being no man at all." [#manhood](#)

"The woman affirms her womanhood in the life-affirming act of childbirth, which involves its great share of pain and danger, and the near approach of death. The man affirms his manhood not in the mere pleasure of a sexual act but in the life-affirming risk of death, in the case of something great, something that redounds to the benefit of all." [#manhood](#)

On avoiding girls in order to become a man:

"That means that a boy will naturally shy away from girls during his longer period of sexual latency and his also more delayed and more protracted period of puberty. He has the work of man-making to do, though he may be only fitfully conscious of it. It is foolish and insensitive to charge him with hating girls. The truth is just the opposite. He and his friends like girls, and are powerfully attracted to them, and that is why they have to keep them to the side for a while, because otherwise the things they must do as boys will not get done at all. **Boys in the company of girls do not form the strong bonds of male friendship, because they are too busy competing for the attention of the girls**, so that they do not invent football, map out the forest, tinker with combustion engines, or bring down their first stag. So it appears that for the sake of both married love and the masculine camaraderie that is so dynamic in its cultural possibilities, we ought to pay attention to the boy's needs and strengths and arrange social and educational opportunities accordingly." One argument for sex-segregated schooling.

A quote, or a reference to a quote, from CS Lewis: Equality is medicine, not food. We have political equalities because men are bad. [#CS-Lewis](#)

Many boys who don't find sports appealing find other forms of combat appealing: chess or debate or even just excellence in a particular field.

Esolen is averse to using the word "civilize" to describe the effect of women on men. He prefers "domesticate."

"When a man marries, the ancients observed, he will naturally be the less ready to fight for his nation. He will place his family first. The woman has an altogether salutary influence upon the man's manners. But manners in a home and a neighborhood are not laws in a city. Laws and manners make up the weave of a society. Each is necessary, and each is related to the other, but they are not the

Society. Each is necessary, and each is related to the other, but they are not the same. **It is men who civilize men...**"

On #education:

"John Senior came to see that his students could not become sane Thomists, because they had no foundation of experience to build upon. They could not rise up in our to the Creator of the stars of night, because they had never really encountered the stars of night to begin with. Grace could hardly perfect nature where nature itself was lacking. So, in the most fruitful and counter-technological educational program I know of, the Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas, begun in 1971, Senior and his two colleagues, Frank Felick and Dennis Quinn, provided young people with both nature and man's first art, his most natural and also most religious art—poetry. They taught them how to sing. They taught the boys and girls how to dance with one another in an ordered and merry way: the waltz. They had them memorize and recite poetry. They brought them outdoors and showed them their way around the starlit sky."

"Never underestimate the good to be gained by sweat, work, camaraderie, a bonfire, and coffee."

On the importance of school and family pulling side by side:

"Boys are or rather believe themselves to be relentless logicians. They believe that they arrive at their beliefs by reason and not sentiment. If authorities clash, they boys may draw the conclusion you do not expect: that no authority is worth a straw."

"Men fall in love with women, but boys fall in admiration and emulation of the man who can make things happen, and if that man is holy, they learn the ways of holiness sometimes without even suspecting it."

Books Esolen mentions, to perhaps be read:

- Carl Sandburg, *Prairie-Town Boy*
- Father Flanagan of Boys Town*
- Peter Ibbetson*, George Du Maurier
- Tom Brown's School Days*, Thomas Hughes

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