

AMERICAN MEN

JORDAN
RITTER
CONN

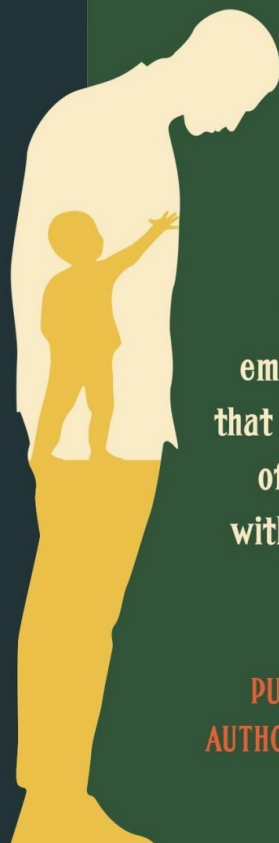


“A masterclass in
empathetic storytelling
that brings us into the lives
of real men grappling
with the silent pressures
of masculinity.”

— GILBERT KING,
PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING
AUTHOR OF *DEVIL IN THE GROVE*

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NEW YORK BOSTON

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INTRODUCTION

Every Saturday night when I was in high school, I sat in a room with a half dozen other teenage boys, and I announced whether I'd made it through the week without masturbating. Usually, the answer was no. I was seventeen and impossibly horny. But whenever I could say yes, I felt like I was the strongest man who'd ever lived.

I understand that this ritual may seem odd, at least if you've never spent much time in conservative Christian circles. But my parents raised me to love Jesus. And what I learned, from the Christian schools I attended as a child in Atlanta and a teen in Philadelphia, the youth groups and the church camps where I spent weeks every summer, was that the best way for a teenage boy to love Jesus was to never ever lay a finger on his own penis.

There were exceptions, of course. Peeing. Showering, though you should make sure to scrub quickly and move on. But other forms of touching led inevitably to erections, and erections left you vulnerable to the siren's call of masturbation, and that, along with accepting hand jobs or blow jobs or, god forbid, sexual intercourse outside of marriage, was among the gravest of imaginable sins.

This small group of guys from my small Christian school gathered each Saturday night for "Bible Study." Rather than *studying* the *Bible*, though, we asked each other a list of questions, confessing how we'd sinned and advising each other about how to be better. I only remember a few of the questions. Did we lie? Did we gossip? Did we disrespect our parents or struggle with pride? Did we objectify or demean any girls or women? But all of those came after the first question: *So, uh, any of you guys jack off?*

I barely remember anything specific that was said. But I remember my

desperate striving. I remember the torture of being left home alone with high-speed internet; the pain of beating my parents to the mailbox to grab the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue but then heroically throwing it straight in the trash; the shivering while standing in yet another cold shower, where I waited for sinful urges to subside. And I remember how I learned to fear my own body.

That particular lesson wasn't restricted to the Bible Study. Everywhere I turned, then and for years to come, the same message: Your body is designed for destruction. I knew boys like me who were abusers. I knew boys like me who had been abused by men. In locker rooms and on bus rides to basketball games, I heard jokes about rape that sounded like they might not really be jokes. Sometimes I laughed and felt guilty. Sometimes I laughed and felt nothing at all. Puritanical theology taught me that my flesh was dangerous, and everywhere I looked, the world confirmed it. I became terrified of what I might do if I indulged the faintest desire. So I took the cold showers. I did everything I could to show up to that Bible Study each week and announce that I hadn't given in to temptation.

You'll be shocked to learn that as an adult I have spent thousands of dollars on therapy. Apparently it's difficult to spend years learning to hate and fear your teenage body, and then try to love that same body as a grown man. And yet, no matter how much I now disagree with the framework of those conversations at Bible Study, I still recall those Saturday nights as some of the best of my life. The strange thing about forcing yourself to confess your sins to your peers is that it forces you into the kinds of intimate conversations that young men so rarely have. Once we finished talking about our masturbation habits, we moved on to all the other ways we'd struggled during that week. We talked about our anger and our insecurities, our futures and our fathers. We pushed each other to treat our mothers and sisters and girlfriends with greater respect and care. Something was unlocked by the directness of these weekly conversations. We grew into a group of young men who actually cared about each other's inner lives. Perhaps more importantly, we gave each other permission to care about our

own.

When I decided to become a journalist a few years later, I attended school in a place that promised the exact *opposite* cultural experience of my evangelical upbringing: Berkeley, California. On the first day of class, my tiny, terrifying professor told us to take the train into San Francisco's Mission District, interview ten people about their lives, and write a paragraph about each one by the end of the day. This presented a problem: I was afraid to talk to strangers. My entire life, I had been debilitatingly shy. I forced myself to get through the assignment, mostly by only interviewing bored-looking shopkeepers, and as months passed, things got easier. Later in the semester, I spent a day under a highway overpass, talking with the men who lived in its shadows about the traumas and addictions that had brought them there, and the ambitions they believed would lift them out. I talked with one of the city's most famous provocateurs and party hosts about his journey after a life of sex work on the streets of 1980s Manhattan. I spent months with a high school soccer team filled with children of undocumented immigrants, talking with them about their angers and their joys, the ways they feared for their families and pressured themselves to provide better lives for the loved ones who'd provided for *them*.

Journalism provided a kind of shield. I didn't need to feel social anxiety, because I wasn't there to *socialize*. I was there to ask questions unsuited for polite conversation. The kind of questions that I'd had to become comfortable with back when I'd been a teenager listening to my friends confess their sins. And what I realized, quickly, was that when you ask those questions, most people *want* to answer. They're just waiting for someone who won't recoil when they tell the truth.

In the decade and a half since then, I've built my career around asking people—the vast majority of them men—about intimate details of their lives. I've sat in a Las Vegas luxury suite with a retired NBA player, listening to his memories of childhood sexual abuse. I've stood in the pulpit of a snake-handling church in Appalachian Kentucky, talking to a pastor about why he continues to worship with the same poisonous snakes that killed his father.

I've been in a tattoo parlor in West Palm Beach, where a man whose sister was murdered in a terrorist attack sat while her face was inked on his body. I've talked with soldiers left adrift by the end of their time in wars, with aging athletes facing the reality of the failure of their bodies, with men full of rage and regret, jealousy and love and desperate longing. When not writing about men themselves, I've written about women who'd suffered the effects of male violence—an activist speaking against rape culture in the years after she was gang-raped by college football players, mothers of Black children who'd been killed by police, a college athlete rebuilding her life after her father's suicide.

Nearly all of us inherit similar ideas about what it means to embody an ideal form of masculinity. Physical power over other men, sexual attractiveness, emotional steadiness, and the ability to support a family, to name a few. And all of us, at one point or another, fail to live up to that ideal. Achilles takes an arrow, Michael Jordan grows a belly, Albert Einstein watches younger minds overtake his own. For some, this failure arrives early in life. For others, not until middle age or even later. For most, it happens in fits and starts as we embody certain ideals in some moments and fall short of them in others. And our relationship to masculinity comes to be defined by how we navigate the gap between the men we think we should be and the men we actually are.

American Men is a book that explores that gap. I set out to chart how several men built their own relationship to masculinity and how they navigated that relationship over time. I wanted to tell the stories of friendships and relationships they'd built and sustained or lost; of traumas they'd suffered and how they'd tried to recover; of the ways in which they'd either inflicted or survived violence; and of their relationship to sex and to their own bodies, of what they've felt as those bodies carried them through the world.

I started reaching out to people I'd interviewed in my work, as well as to friends, and friends of friends, and friends of friends of friends. I began cold-messaging strangers on social media and bringing up the book to men and

women I met on airplanes and in restaurants and bars. Every one of them could think of someone whose story felt relevant. Sometimes, that someone was themselves.

In Prince George's County, Maryland, I talked with a man who told me that every day he was afraid to go home. His grandson had been shot and was paralyzed, and the sight of that boy in a wheelchair reminded him of how he'd failed to make enough money to move their family to a safer neighborhood. In a dingy bar in a corner of Honolulu far from the lights of Waikiki Beach, I met a Korean American man who boasted of his American patriotism, even though he'd never once set foot on the mainland. He had one family on Oahu, another back in Korea, and often felt caught in between. In Youngstown, Ohio, I met a man who bragged about using his mob connections to order a prison hit on a convicted child molester. I talked with a fashion designer from Los Angeles who'd pledged a sorority in college but left it when other members helped him realize that he was not a woman, but a trans man. In Green Bay, Wisconsin, I met a man who introduced himself by asking me, "Where are the bitches at?," then alternated between hitting on me, lamenting the invisibility he felt as a bisexual man in the Midwest, and referring to his boyfriend by several antigay slurs—before he aggressively groped me when I told him I had to leave.

Some of these conversations have been thrilling and nourishing. Some have been deeply unpleasant. In all, the men I've encountered shared a hunger for someone to listen as they peered into the often-hidden corners of their lives.

During the process of speaking with men across the United States, I decided on the four whose stories are told in this book. First, there is Ryan. He grows up on the Akwesasne Mohawk territory straddling the border between upstate New York and Canada, the son of a longtime leader in his community. As a kid, Ryan endures beatings at the hands of older boys. As a man, he feels compelled to inflict that same violence on other men. All along, he struggles to reconcile his relationship to his own sexuality. He wants to

love men and to brutalize them. To find a nurturing romantic partner and to exact vengeance on the kinds of men who tormented him in the past.

Next, there is Gideon, a West Point graduate and former pitcher, tall and handsome and intelligent, a paragon of white American masculinity. A man who gets whatever he wants, until one day, he doesn't. The wife he loves sleeps with another man. His fast-moving career grinds to a halt. A life so full of promise settles into stasis. A worldview is shattered, bringing him undone.

And then there is Joseph, a law student in the early days of his marriage, working to flee the lives he's left behind. In one he was an aspiring minister, preaching to young men the dangers of the flesh. In another he was a soldier, promised tuition for college in exchange for a year serving in the Iraq War. And then there's the life that most haunts him: that of a small child, growing up in a home of poverty and chaos, who's repeatedly sexually abused by a teenage boy.

Finally, there is Nate, a man whom the world once saw as a girl but who always knew he was a boy and never knew how to express it, until, as an adolescent, he discovers the existence of transgender men. Throughout his life, he fights to express his masculinity in ways the world will find acceptable, and sometimes in ways that it won't. As he struggles to seek health care for his transition, he also struggles with an even more daunting dilemma: Once you have the right beard, and the right clothes, and the right chest, and the right voice, then what, exactly, does it mean to be a man?

I've spent years with each of these men, talking with them and following them through their daily lives. I've been staggered by their openness and vulnerability, their ability to not only face but also to share their rawest moments. I started work on this book with the belief that every man's story is interesting enough to be told, if only he would dig deep enough into the uncomfortable parts of his own existence. These were the four men I found who were most willing to dig.

To honor their vulnerability, I've agreed to change some names and