

Iron John (1990)
Robert Bly

Robert Bly is a well-respected American poet. How did he come to write a self-help bestseller?

Bly had been giving talks on mythology to supplement his income, and found that the brothers Grimm tale *Iron John* had a powerful impact on men. His resulting book about this age-old story helped establish a men's movement.

In early seminars, Bly asked men to re-enact a scene from *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus is instructed to lift his sword as he approaches the symbol of matriarchal energy, Circe. Peace-loving men were unable to carry out the lifting of the sword, so fixed were they on the idea of not "hurting" anyone. These were men who had come of age during the Vietnam war, and they wanted nothing to do with a manhood which, to feel its aliveness, seemed to require an "enemy". Instead of the single-mindedness of the 1950s male, they had a receptivity to different viewpoints and agendas.

The world is a much better place for these "softer males" - they are lovely human beings, Bly admits - but such men are also distinguished by their unhappiness, caused by passivity. Bly tried to teach these men that flashing a sword didn't necessarily mean you were a warmonger, but that you could show "a joyful decisiveness" which was rooted in love and respect.

Iron John is about taking men back, through myth and legend, to the source of their masculinity, and finding the true warrior's path.

The story

The Iron John story has been around in one form or another for thousands of years. In a nutshell: a hunter answers a challenge from the King to go to a part of the forest that men don't come back from. The hunter goes into the forest, and his dog is taken by a hand that shoots out of a lake. Slowly draining the lake by buckets, he finds at the bottom a hairy Wild Man, who is taken back to the town castle and imprisoned.

The King's son is playing with his golden ball when it accidentally rolls into the cage holding the Wild Man. At length, the prince does a deal in which he gets the ball back, but only having released the hairy man in the cage. This deal marks the beginning of the boy's manhood: he is willing to separate himself from his parents and retrieve his 'golden ball' (that alive feeling of youth) through discovering his masculine energy.

Who or what is a Wild Man?

Bly makes the important distinction between the Wild Man and the savage man. The savage is the type who has wrecked the environment, abused women and so on, his inner desperation having been pushed out onto the world as a disregard or hatred of others. The Wild Man has been prepared to examine where it is he hurts; because of this he is more like a Zen priest or a shaman than a savage. The Wild Man is masculinity's highest expression, the savage man its lowest.

A civilized man tries to incorporate his wildness into a larger self. When the prince in the story risks all and goes into the forest with the Wild Man, the parents simply think their boy has been taken by the devil; in fact, it is a profound initiation, an awakening. Bly's message is that the modern obsession with making childhood a cocoon of light closes children off to sources of power. Addictions and psychological disorders mirror society's inability to accommodate the 'dark side'.

Bly believes that New Age thinking about harmony and higher consciousness holds a dangerous attraction to naive men. Mythology beckons us to enter fully into life, with all its blood and tears and joy; the way we achieve full realisation of ourselves is to focus on 'one precious thing' (an idea, a person, a quest, a question) and the decision to follow it at any cost is the sign of maturity. When we make a clear choice, the King inside us awakens and our powers are finally released.

Re-awakening the warrior

Warrior energy, if not honoured or channelled, ends up expressed as teen gang warfare, wife beating, paedophilia, and feelings of shame. If used rightly, it can become a source of delight to all in its refinement. How else, Bly asks, can we explain the unconscious admiration for the glorious knight, or a man in starched white uniform and medals? This image represents the civilisation of warrior energy.

The author also calls for the warrior spirit and occasional 'fierceness' to be used in relationships. He quotes Jung, who said that American marriages were 'the saddest around because the man reserved all his fighting for the office'. At home he was a pussycat. Fierceness involves protecting what is rightfully yours, and women want to know what a man's boundaries are.

Coming to ground

A man may spend his twenties and thirties as a sort of 'flying boy'; in his imagination, nothing can hold him down. But for a man to be made whole, there has to be something that rips him open, a wound which allows soul to enter. In many myths, a wild animal gets close enough to a young man to gore his leg; in the Iron John story, it is a knight who chases after the prince and stabs him in the leg. As he falls off his horse, the golden hair he has hidden from everyone underneath the helmet is revealed. Until then he has seemed two-dimensional. Appreciation of pain and sorrow, Bly says, is as vital to a man's potentiality as having the ability to soar through the air.

A hunger for the masculine

The male initiation ceremonies of all cultures is a deepening, a forced discovery of the dark side. Women can't initiate men. In many cultures, a boy is taken off from the women who have so far managed his life, and made to live among older men for a while. Modern society has few structures for initiation, and boys can spend their teenage years prolonging their freedom, manifested in wild behaviour, rudeness to parents (particularly the mother), and clothing and music that attracts attention.

Millions of men have grown up with an environment of feminine energy – which is isn't a problem in itself but boys also need the masculine. Men start to think more about their fathers as they get older, and mythology has a lot to say about the heaviness of 'entering the Father's house', leaving behind the expectation of lightness and comfort to face grim reality. Bly says Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for instance, is an elaborate metaphor for this process of moving from the mother's side to the father's.

Colours of a life

In Iron John, the prince, disguised as a knight, rides a red then a white then a black horse. These colours have a logical symbolic progression in relation to a man's life: the 'redness' of his emotions and unbridled sexuality in younger years; the 'whiteness' of work and living according to law; and the 'blackness' of maturity in which compassion and humanity have the chance to flower.

In the later years of his presidency, Bly says, Lincoln was a man in black. He had seen it all. No longer ruled by his emotions (red) or some external set of principles or law (white), he had ceased to blame, and had

developed a brilliant, philosophical sense of humour. You tend to know a man who has begun to move into the black because he is really trusted. There are no hidden corners, because he has fully incorporated his shadow.

Final word

Why has Bly's retelling of a fairy tale appealed to millions of Western men?

Iron John has been told around campfires for millennia. Unfortunately, like an inheritance that lies uncollected, many men did not know exactly what they had missed, but this book's impact suggests that many overdue claims for genuine masculinity are now being made - and women and the rest of society will be better off for it too.

The men who may laugh at a book like this are probably the ones who need it the most. The most destructive types tend to be those with the least developed powers of self-examination, and women should welcome any efforts to revive a forceful, but non-destructive, spirit of masculinity. What Iron John has done for men, *Women Who Run With The Wolves* (Clarissa Pinkola Estes) has achieved for women, and is highly recommended.

***Iron John** bears reading twice or more, especially if you are unfamiliar with mythology. This was Bly's first full book of prose, but it includes a good selection of his poems, and they are good.*