

# The End of Men?

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## Extract No. 1 Models of Masculinity

609 words

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, the much-loved 2013 film adaptation of James Thurber's short story from 1939, is a favourite of our family. We've watched it together more times than any other movie. A central character, who haunts the story and yet is mostly conspicuous by his absence, is Sean O'Connell, perfectly played by Sean Penn.

A photojournalist of legendary status, O'Connell has captured some of the most dramatic images in the storied history of LIFE magazine. Everything about him oozes a masculine heroic aura. He's ridiculously hardcore, popping up only in the most dangerous and forbidding places. He is unknowable, shrouded in mystery. A distant loner in total control, whether dodging bullets in a war zone, strapped to the top of a biplane flying into the heart of an erupting volcano while everyone else flees, or sitting in solitary, zen-like concentration on a remote alpine peak waiting to snap a shot of the elusive snow leopard.

O'Connell is himself impossibly hard to pin down but ever reliable in coming up with the creative goods. His photographic negatives that arrive at LIFE HQ are met with breathless anticipation. The film roll will often be blood-stained! He's of no fixed address and only communicates through mail sent from obscure and exotic places. While the rest of us live our lives of comparative staid convention, O'Connell operates on a rugged, romantic and adventurous plane. Weathered and tanned, he's truly at home only in the wild.

It's a parody of course, and a very funny one. Sean O'Connell is one of my favourite characters. But his place in this story is illustrative of something that is worth thinking about in our consideration of masculinity: the way various forms of media portray ideal manhood means that men and boys are presented with a conflicted and confusing picture of how they should aim to be. This is especially the case in light of the huge social shifts that have occurred in the last forty years.

### Which masculinity?

Boys and young men today may well be left wondering about which version of masculinity they are supposed to aspire to. It's not at all clear what that should be, and the confusion presents a particularly modern challenge. Are they to aim for the traditional protector/provider? The Renaissance man? The empathetic creative? The sports jock? The warrior? The outdoor expert for every occasion? The reliable, practical, home-renovating type? The free-spirited wanderer? The genius geek on the road to tech-driven wealth? The list could go on of course.

## Extract No.2

578 words

On a Sunday morning in August 2020, Chantelle Doyle and her husband Mark Rapley were surfing at Port Macquarie's Shelley Beach on the New South Wales mid-north coast when she was attacked by a juvenile great white shark estimated to be 10 foot in length. These kinds of attacks are rare and impossible to predict. Surfers know the risks of being in the ocean and in the domain of these large killers, but they are typically willing to bank on the stats being in their favour. Doyle, an environmental scientist, no doubt had that approach, but her number did come up and to her horror she found herself that morning in the jaws of the dreaded monster of the seas.

Her husband, realising what was happening, immediately paddled to where she was, jumped off his board and began punching the shark hard and repeatedly. Eventually it let go and swam away. He and other rescuers managed to get Chantelle to shore. She was airlifted to hospital with serious lacerations to her right leg, but she survived to tell the tale.

'I did what anyone would have done,' Rapley said when in front of the TV cameras. Others of us watching the news bulletins were left to wonder, if faced with the same situation, whether we would in fact act quite like he did. We also had to admit that we hoped never to find out!

Six months before this moment of laudable bravery, a very different story took place in the eastern suburbs of Brisbane. On the morning of 19 February 2020, Hannah Clarke and her three small children aged six, four and three were in their car on a school drop-off run when her estranged husband and father of the children attacked the family. Dousing the interior of the car in petrol, he set it alight. He then prevented a bystander from offering assistance before killing himself with a knife. All three children died at the scene, and Hannah Clarke, severely burned, passed away in hospital later that day. Hannah Clarke had taken out a Domestic Violence Order against her husband, but as is too often the case, the court-issued protection document meant nothing to him in his destructive rage.

These two stories, polar opposites and extreme in nature, are illustrative of vastly different examples of men deploying their physical presence to either protect life or destroy it; to be a self-sacrificing, genuine partner or a menacing force of destruction and cruelty.

### The sobering statistics

The reality is that the relationship between men and violence continues to be problematic. In the years since Hannah Clarke and her children lost their lives in such appalling circumstances, the stats have ground on relentlessly with an average of one woman in Australia losing her life at the hands of an intimate partner every week. Family violence and/or intimate partner violence is the leading cause of serious injury, disability and death for women. One in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence, or both, perpetrated by a man they know.<sup>1</sup> Around 95% of all victims of violence, whether women or men, experience that violence at the hands of a male.<sup>2</sup>

A study released in 2021 found that if a woman earns more than her male partner, her chances of being a victim of domestic violence increase by 35%.<sup>3</sup> Clearly some men struggle to handle situations that deviate from the traditional breadwinner role, which doesn't say much for their fragile egos.

## Extract No. 3 Love as a Framework

444 words

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## Extract 4 A Radical Life

451 words

### A radical life

The Graeco-Roman world of the first century that Jesus was born into was no place for the faint-hearted. It was aggressive, patriarchal and brutal in the exercise of power. Highly stratified and hierarchical, it rewarded the strong and punished the weak.

It's hard for modern readers to comprehend the sheer brutality of that culture – equally evident in domestic settings as in spectacular public festivals of cruelty. The Graeco-Roman conception of the world was of an endless and unchangeable cycle, which meant only the high-born and powerful benefited while the vast majority of people lacked any possibility of personal elevation. Remaining in your allotted station in life was not only right but morally necessary.

Against that background, Jesus' short life and even shorter public engagement exemplified the potency of a radically different way. In Jesus we see a restrained strength, composure and compassion. Throughout the Gospels he models a heart for the poor, the sick, the outcasts and rejects. Whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, adult or child, he exuded welcome and kindness. We see an example of openness to the pain of others and emotional engagement, not detachment, with those he encountered. Importantly, he sought to alleviate suffering and to bring life.

In a society that valued personal honour and self-aggrandisement, Jesus extolled a life of humility and putting others before himself. He taught that if you want to be truly great, you have to become a servant. Nobody was expecting that from the promised Messiah, but he made it clear that in God's eyes, it's loving and serving others that has eternal value. He famously washed his disciples' feet in an enacted metaphor for how he expected his people to live and love. And then, according to the Gospel accounts, he lived that out in the most dramatic way imaginable, willingly going to a sacrificial death on a Roman cross in service of all humanity. It was all about giving rather than taking.

Jesus exemplified action and purpose. He worked hard in a physically demanding job. He travelled the countryside and gave himself to the crowds in a manner that was exhausting. He fought against injustice and hypocrisy, and he engaged with his opponents by listening and offering incisive commentary and searching questions. He refused any kind of violence but was anything but passive. He went willingly into danger to fulfil his mission and courageously faced his enemies and his brutal fate so that others might live. There's 'no greater love' than that, as John's Gospel (and many of our war memorials) state. There has been no more influential life than his, and it's one we need have no misgivings about holding up as a model of vibrant masculinity.