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Why The Gillette Ad Isn't Just About Boys And Men — It's About My Three Daughters, Too

BY JOSEPH WILSON

PHOTO © GILLETTE/YOUTUBE ([HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=KOPMUEYP3A0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOPMUEYP3A0))

Here's a sentence I never thought I'd write: I'm currently involved in a protracted battle with my two-year-old daughter on the gender identity of a horse.

Let me explain.

Every now and then my daughter will wander over to the bookcase and pull out a book I've never seen before. Last week it was a mediocre board-book without any text — just pictures of animals cuddling their offspring. I try to be aware of the unstated assumptions that go into the books I read with her, so I made up a narration and labelled one of the full-grown animals a dad.

"No, that's the mom," says my two-year-old.

Relevant Reading: Understanding Gender in 2019 is Way Over My Head — But My Teen Girls Are Helping Me Get There

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/understanding-gender-in-2019-is-way-over-my-head-but-my-teen-girls-are-help>)

“It could be. It doesn’t say. I like to think it’s the dad,” I said.

“No. It’s the mom.”

I’m not sure whether to let it go. I want my daughter to create her own meaning and make sense of the books she encounters, but I also don’t want her to assume that whenever she sees a parent displaying affection for a child, that it must be a woman. I guess after watching “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” — also known as, the Gillette ad (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koPmuEyP3a0>) from last week — I’m feeling super attuned to how men are depicted in the shows my kids watch and the books they read.

And, frankly, I believe our media still has a lot of catching up to do.

When it comes to female characters, our daughters (three of them: ages 7, 5 and 2) have much more choice than when I was growing up in the '80s. They are fans of Merida from *Brave* and Moana from, well, *Moana*, both girls who push back on what their societies expect of them. They just discovered the newly re-launched *Carmen Sandiego* with its kick-ass female lead, and *Doc McStuffins* is always a solid choice. But when it comes to male characters, most of them consist of lightly camouflaged stereotypes of the “strong man” trope. Both Moana and Merida’s fathers are large, physically strong and are chiefs of their tribe. They only reluctantly give up their conservative views about their daughters by the end of the movies. Merida’s brothers (triplets) are always portrayed as fighting or eating, a classic example of the “boys will be boys” trope called out in the Gillette spot.

"But when it comes to male characters, most of them consist of lightly camouflaged stereotypes of the 'strong man' trope."

And good luck with anything from the past. Our daughters recently watched the Christmas classic *Home Alone*, where Kevin McCallister takes his queues from the male characters he sees on TV in gangster and western movies. “It’s my house and I have to defend it,” he concludes, setting the stage for the violence to come.

What I believe the Gillette ad is designed to do is bring relief to these stereotypes, by spotlighting the culture of toxic masculinity and asking us to think about it and have small and big conversations. And it seems to have worked fairly well so far, inspiring op-eds for miles. But Gillette certainly isn't the first to talk about the subject of masculinity, nor will it be the last.

Rachel Giese's book *Boys: What It Means to Become a Man*

(<https://www.harpercollins.ca/9781443442909/boys/>) has been on the market for almost a year and is an excellent resource for any parent who is interested in unpacking our culture's idea of masculinity..

Relevant Reading: How To Talk About Sexism With Your Son

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/how-to-talk-about-sexism-with-your-son>)

Harry's, another razor company, has an ad I really like but hasn't seen nearly as much fanfare as the Gillette ad. In fact, I believe it works better in actually changing our views of men.

Rapper/actor Ludacris reads a book

(<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCugL2rOcVU9DxicZJLJ9beg>) to his toddler-aged son, which serves as the inspiration for a song he then sings in the shower. It's a 30-second spot for body wash and isn't going to win any Pulitzer prizes, but it works; it shows a manly man, known best for his role in the macho *Fast and the Furious* franchise, at a vulnerable moment, reading *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* to his child. While I think it's a shame that it takes a multinational corporation to get people talking about these issues, I do believe the more roles like this that appear on TV, the better. They slowly sink in and change our mindset. Here's hoping Gillette actually makes the change they are advocating for, too.

My daughter and I still can't agree on the gender of that horse. And that's OK. At least she knows it's something that can be debated, and that people (I mean horses) aren't as one-dimensional as they are often made to appear.



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