

was disregarded by the haste of history. Literature makes real what history forgot. And because history has been what was, literature will offer what history has not always been. That is why we will never witness—bar universal catastrophe—the end of history.”

ARTS & LETTERS

R.I.P., *Iron John*

THE SOURCE: “Remembering *Iron John*” by Jess Row, in *Slate*, Aug. 8, 2006.

A LACK OF IRONY IS WHAT killed *Iron John*, poet Robert Bly’s call to arms for a men’s movement published in 1990. It’s been largely reduced to a joke, and that’s too bad, says Jess Row, a writer and English professor at the College of New Jersey.

Recent books such as Caitlin Flanagan’s *To Hell With All That: Loving and Loathing Your Inner Housewife* and Harvey Mansfield’s *Manliness* criticize modern domestic life and argue that our culture’s attempts to press for gender equality have produced unhappiness and social breakdown. “Flanagan and Mansfield are united in nostalgia for a kind of Douglas Sirk version of the ’50s, without the irony, in which men provided, led, fought, and defended, and women cultivated, nurtured, healed, and willingly acquiesced to men’s desires,” writes

Row. Such books prop up old stereotypes and prejudices, he says, but they aren’t being met with better books “that examine contemporary relationships and gender roles without panic, dread, or shame.” This dearth is particularly evident in the men’s department.

In *Iron John: A Book About Men*, which is structured on an allegorical interpretation of a German fairytale, Bly argues that contemporary American men are sorely lacking nurturing fathers, meaningful mentors, self-respect, and “most of all,” Row says, “the ability to cultivate their inner resources—as Socrates said, to know themselves.” Though reviled by many feminists, Row writes, Bly supports the women’s movement, as long as both sexes acknowledge that men’s and women’s inner needs are different.

The book has its share of flaws—myopia, a failure to grapple with Freud, overgeneralizations,

etc.—but what was fatal to it “was simply that it was too easy a target for satire.” Bly himself—a shambling bear of a man who strummed a lute and wore colorful vests—cut an unfortunately comic figure, and many misconstrued his book and the men’s seminars he conducted to mean that “contemporary men need to somehow return to nature, re-create tribal ceremonies, or otherwise fetishize what they have lost.” Yet the affirmation and hope Bly offered to men set numbly adrift in the post-World War II industrial economy were real, as were his optimism, his generosity, and his fearless reliance on poetry.

The value of his message is lost in the post-*Seinfeld* landscape. “Irony, and the fear of ridicule, have, in a way, made any serious discussion of men’s emotional lives impossible,” writes Row. The sensitive-man ethos Bly espoused is now the butt of advertising cam-

paigns and wisecracks. The resulting repression means that “we still lack a basic vocabulary for, say, the experience of a stay-at-home father, or the difference (from a man’s point of view) between flirtation and harassment at work. If we don’t find a way of emulating Bly’s generosity of spirit and willingness to risk truth-telling, we’re going to remain stuck with recycled arguments and archetypes, lacking a language that applies to our own era.”

EXCERPT

Museum Leadership 101

I was appointed director [of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art] in May of 1977 and I would have to say it’s a different world, to the point that, knowing everything I know, were I offered the job again I’m not sure I would take it. . . . It has become bureaucratized and legalized, with a paralyzing near-zero risk-tolerance level, and . . . financial issues dominate everything we do.

—PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in *The New Criterion* (Sept. 2006)