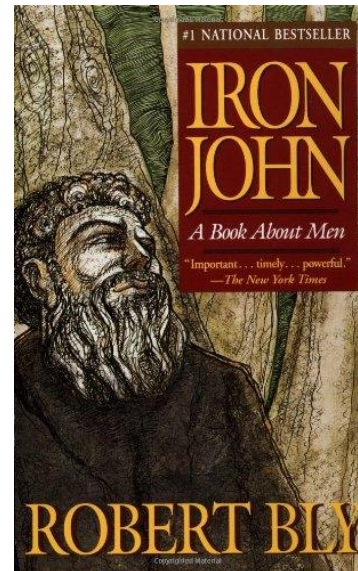


**How Boys Become Men – Untangling
Mythology**
a review of
Iron John:
A Book About Men

By Robert Bly (1990)



Bly uses the ancient tale of “Iron John”, as recorded by the Grimm brothers, to elucidate the traditional wisdom of how male elders initiate boys into manhood. Except that these steps, portrayed in the space of a few days by the story, may take a good portion of a man’s life in practice. What’s missing from Bly’s somewhat scattered account is any comparison with the today’s maturation processes (boot camp, going off to college, hazing, etc). Except Bly notes that they do not work well for a great many boys, prolonging immaturity or even leading to gang behavior or worse, especially if stunted by a shaming or absent mother or father.

Bly’s strength is his great knowledge of the relevant traditional mythology, whether from post-Roman European sources, or more ancient Celtic, Greco-Roman, Egyptian, Persian, or Indian sources. But his key concept is far more primitive – the “Wild Man” – hearkening back to the “Master of the Hunt” of prehistoric times. Yet somehow this Wild Man is also supposed to be sensitive and honorable, not a brute: a person who can navigate modern society with ease and confidence, with both self-knowledge and empathy. He is assertive as needed, not numb or passive, but not overly aggressive either.

On the outside, “The Wild Man is the door to the wildness in nature” ... “he is the male protector of the earth” (p 240-41), while on the inside he is a guide to our grief and pain, often by enduring a wound or prolonged hardship. An elder or mentor can guide the youth through these trials, separating him from the mother and imparting the wisdom of the ages through stories. In this manner a boy may become an adult by age 15 in indigenous societies, but hardly ready for high school today.

Bly divides this maturation process into 5 stages: (1) bonding with, then separating from the mother, (2) bonding with, then separating from the father, (3) guidance from a mentor, (4) apprenticeship to the Wild Man, (5) marriage to the Holy Woman (p 195). Instead, today’s “educational system, which puts boys and girls to sleep for years, right up through graduate school, is in collusion with the dark side of the Great Mother [Alma Mater]. Essays on deconstruction are written by people with pins in their necks” (p. 198).

“And what of the men who are really unlucky, the man who does not love his mother or his father, the man severely beaten or abused or forcefully abandoned? These are the suffering men whose pain is deeper than any of us can imagine. Such a man becomes a cold-hearted survivalist, living in the Idaho of the mind with his dogs and an AK-47” (p 203).

The view from mythology is for the young man to move “from the Red Knight to the White Knight to the Black Knight, as in the adventures of Parsifal” (p 217), meaning “from red intensity to white engagement to black humanity” (p 220). The red represents the blood and wounds of the youth fighting for a superficial cause. The white represents more politically savvy engagements – finding allies and “coming to the rescue”. The black represents the wise elder who guides us toward the more deeply grounded ways of humanity and nature.