

How movies teach manhood

You know, my favorite part of being a dad is the movies I get to watch. I love sharing my favorite movies with my kids, and when my daughter was four, we got to watch "The Wizard of Oz" together. It totally dominated her imagination for months. Her favorite character was Glinda, of course. It gave her a great excuse to wear a sparkly dress and carry a wand.

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But you watch that movie enough times, and you start to realize how unusual it is. Now we live today, and are raising our children, in a kind of children's-fantasy-spectacular-industrial complex. But "The Wizard of Oz" stood alone. It did not start that trend. Forty years later was when the trend really caught on, with, interestingly, another movie that featured a metal guy and a furry guy rescuing a girl by dressing up as the enemy's guards. Do you know what I'm talking about? (Laughter) Yeah.

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Now, there's a big difference between these two movies, a couple of really big differences between "The Wizard of Oz" and all the movies we watch today. One is there's very little violence in "The Wizard of Oz." The monkeys are rather aggressive, as are the apple trees. But I think if "The Wizard of Oz" were made today, the wizard would say, "Dorothy, you are the savior of Oz that the prophecy foretold. Use your magic slippers to defeat the computer-generated armies of the Wicked Witch." But that's not how it happens.

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Another thing that's really unique about "The Wizard of Oz" to me is that all of the most heroic and wise and even villainous characters are female.

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Now I started to notice this when I actually showed "Star Wars" to my daughter, which was years later, and the situation was different. At that point I also had a son. He was only three at the time. He was not invited to the screening. He was too young for that. But he was the second child, and the level of supervision had plummeted. (Laughter) So he wandered in, and it imprinted on him like a mommy duck does to its duckling, and I don't think he understands what's going on, but he is sure soaking in it.

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And I wonder what he's soaking in. Is he picking up on the themes of courage and perseverance and loyalty? Is he picking up on the fact that Luke joins an army to overthrow the government? Is he picking up on the fact that there are only boys in the universe except for Aunt Beru, and of course this princess, who's really cool, but who kind of waits around through most of the movie so that she can award the hero with a medal and a wink to thank him for saving the universe, which he does by the magic that he was born with?

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Compare this to 1939 with "The Wizard of Oz." How does Dorothy win her movie? By making friends with everybody and being a leader. That's kind of the world I'd rather raise my kids in -- Oz, right? -- and not the world of dudes fighting, which is where we kind of have to be. Why is there so much Force -- capital F, Force -- in the movies we have for our kids, and so little yellow brick road?

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There is a lot of great writing about the impact that the boy-violent movie has on girls, and you should do that reading. It's very good. I haven't read as much on how boys are picking up on this vibe. I know from my own experience that Princess Leia did not provide the adequate context that I could have used in navigating the adult world that is co-ed.

(Laughter) I think there was a first-kiss moment when I really expected the credits to start rolling because that's the end of the movie, right? I finished my quest, I got the girl. Why are you still standing there? I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

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The movies are very, very focused on defeating the villain and getting your reward, and there's not a lot of room for other relationships and other journeys. It's almost as though if you're a boy, you are a dopey animal, and if you are a girl, you should bring your warrior costume. There are plenty of exceptions, and I will defend the Disney princesses in front of any you. But they do send a message to boys, that they are not, the boys are not really the target audience. They are doing a phenomenal job of teaching girls how to defend against the patriarchy, but they are not necessarily showing boys how they're supposed to defend against the patriarchy. There's no models for them. And we also have some terrific women who are writing new stories for our kids, and as three-dimensional and delightful as Hermione and Katniss are, these are still war movies. And, of course, the most successful studio of all time continues to crank out classic after classic, every single one of them about the journey of a boy, or a man, or two men who are friends, or a man and his son, or two men who are raising a little girl. Until, as many of you are thinking, this year, when they finally came out with "Brave." I recommend it to all of you. It's on demand now. Do you remember what the critics said when "Brave" came out? "Aw, I can't believe Pixar made a princess movie." It's very good. Don't let that stop you.

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Now, almost none of these movies pass the Bechdel Test. I don't know if you've heard of this. It has not yet caught on and caught fire, but maybe today we will start a movement. Alison Bechdel is a comic book artist, and back in the mid-'80s, she recorded this conversation she'd had with a friend about assessing the movies that they saw. And it's very simple. There's just three questions you should ask:

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Is there more than one character in the movie that is female who has lines? So try to meet that bar.

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And do these women talk to each other at any point in the movie?

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And is their conversation about something other than the guy that they both like? (Laughter)

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Right? Thank you. (Applause) Thank you very much.

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Two women who exist and talk to each other about stuff. It does happen. I've seen it, and yet I very rarely see it in the movies that we know and love.

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In fact, this week I went to see a very high-quality movie, "Argo." Right? Oscar buzz, doing great at the box office, a consensus idea of what a quality Hollywood film is. It pretty much flunks the Bechdel test. And I don't think it should, because a lot of the movie, I don't know if you've seen it, but a lot of the movie takes place in this embassy where men and women are hiding out during the hostage crisis. We've got quite a few scenes of the men having deep, angst-ridden conversations in this hideout, and the great moment for one of the actresses is to peek through the door and say, "Are you coming to bed, honey?" That's Hollywood for you.

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So let's look at the numbers. 2011, of the 100 most popular movies, how many of them do you think actually have female protagonists? Eleven. It's not bad. It's not as many percent as the number of women we've just elected to Congress, so that's good. But there is a number that is greater than this that's going to bring this room down.

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Last year, The New York Times published a study that the government had done. Here's what it said. One out of five women in America say that they have been sexually assaulted some time in their life.

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Now, I don't think that's the fault of popular entertainment. I don't think kids' movies have anything to do with that. I don't even think that music videos or pornography are really directly related to that, but something is going wrong, and when I hear that statistic, one of the things I think of is that's a lot of sexual assailants. Who are these guys? What are they learning? What are they failing to learn? Are they absorbing the story that a male hero's job is to defeat the villain with violence and then collect the reward, which is a woman who has no friends and doesn't speak? Are we soaking up that story?

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You know, as a parent with the privilege of raising a daughter like all of you who are doing the same thing, we find this world and this statistic very alarming and we want to prepare them. We have tools at our disposal like "girl power," and we hope that that will help, but I gotta wonder, is girl power going to protect them if, at the same time, actively or passively, we are training our sons to maintain their boy power? I mean, I think the Netflix queue is one way that we can do something very important, and I'm talking mainly to the dads here. I think we have got to show our sons a new definition of manhood.

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The definition of manhood is already turning upside down. You've read about how the new economy is changing the roles of caregiver and wage earner. They're throwing it up in the air. So our sons are going to have to find some way of adapting to this, some new relationship with each other, and I think we really have to show them, and model for them, how a real man is someone who trusts his sisters and respects them, and wants to be on their team, and stands up against the real bad guys, who are the men who want to abuse the women. And I think our job in the Netflix queue is to look out for those movies that pass the Bechdel Test, if we can find them, and to seek out the heroines who are there, who show real courage, who bring people together, and to nudge our sons to identify with those heroines and to say, "I want to be on their team," because they're going to be on their team.

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When I asked my daughter who her favorite character was in "Star Wars," do you know what she said? Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan Kenobi and Glinda. What do these two have in common? Maybe it's not just the sparkly dress. I think these people are experts. I think these are the two people in the movie who know more than anybody else, and they love sharing their knowledge with other people to help them reach their potential. Now, they are leaders. I like that kind of quest for my daughter, and I like that kind of quest for my son. I want more quests like that. I want fewer quests where my son is told, "Go out and fight it alone," and more quests where he sees that it's his job to join a team, maybe a team led by women, to help other people become better and be better people, like the Wizard of Oz. Thank you.