

## Book Review

What Men Endure to Be Men: A review of Jonathan Gottschall, *The professor in the cage: Why men fight, and why we like to watch*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2015, 288 pp. \$26.95, ISBN 978-1-59420-563-7.

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Why do we love to watch violence? And why do men seem to enjoy violent confrontations with other men in spite of the obvious risks? Jonathan Gottschall embarks on a voyage of self-discovery and stumbles upon answers to these questions along the way. However, his voyage is no mere ivory tower academic exercise. Gottschall chronicles a grueling, brutal journey from mild-mannered professor to hardened warrior, culminating in a dramatic mixed martial arts (MMA) cage fight in a small town hockey arena.

Gottschall's story is fully informed by the evolutionary perspective, as he regularly invokes principles such as ritualized aggression (what he refers to as the “*monkey dance*”), dominance, and female choice to make sense of the world he encounters in MMA fighting. Readers familiar with the concept of “*precarious manhood*” (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008) or with Dan Fessler's “*crazy bastard hypothesis*” (Fessler, Tiokhin, Holbrook, Gervais, & Snyder, 2014) will find much that rings true in his story. Having said this, anyone with an even rudimentary understanding of evolutionary psychology will not learn much that is new about the science of human aggression from his story, but that will not detract from the guilty pleasure of witnessing a real-life blood and guts unfolding of evolutionary psychology in the pages of Gottschall's book. Along the way, he also treats the reader to historical tidbits about the history of dueling, torture, and macabre blood sports of all stripes, much of which *will* be new to evolutionists who read the book.

The flavor of the book can perhaps be best captured through a series of quotes directly from Gottschall's own prose:

1. “I wanted to fight, I suppose, for one of the main reasons men have always fought: to discover if I was a coward.” (pp. 4–5)
2. “Young men bulk up on weights for many reasons . . . . Muscle is a bold advertisement: *I am not a rabbit. I am not food.*” (p. 68)
3. “Masculinity is not a cultural invention. It is not the result of a conspiracy of men against women.” (p. 77)
4. “But above all we go to the gym to try to acquire the habit of bravery.” (p. 174)
5. “To physically dominate another man is intoxicating.” (p. 205)
6. “The relationship between fighter and fan is not one of exploitation. It is symbiotic, not parasitic. The fighter desperately wants to be a hero, and the fan desperately wants to worship heroism—and neither can get what he needs without the other.” (p. 229)
7. “It [the project] made me feel more compassion for my own sex. (p. 234)

Gottschall was recently featured in a cover story of *The Chronicle Review* (Wescott, 2015). The focus of this piece was how it can be that a successful writer with significant exposure in the popular media is unable to secure a tenure-track position in an English department anywhere, with the takeaway message being that the bias against Darwinist perspectives in literary studies is so strong that scholars like Gottschall have essentially been blackballed from the discipline of literary studies. This may be true. However, in reading his book one senses that other, more personal factors may also be at work. His confrontational, bull-in-the-China-shop style has probably rankled more than a few scholars in that field, and his open disdain for English professors in general has certainly not won him many friends. As Exhibit A, let me share his description of a typical English professor (p. 99):

Quick. Don't think about it. Imagine an English professor in your head. No, a *male* English professor. What do you see? Tweeds? Elbow patches? A high pale forehead with thinning hair combed over? Eyeglasses with designer frames? Oh God, you see a cravat? His fingernails are clean and white. His palms are silky and uncalloused. If you grip him by his upper arm, your fingers plunge to the bone. He prefers wine to beer. But when he drinks beer, he prefers pretentious microbrews that he sniffs and swirls, while waxing on about oakly hints and lemony essences.



In short, I tremendously enjoyed reading this book about why men fight, and why we like to watch. In the spirit of full disclosure, I will share that I grew up in a working-class world where one's physical toughness and athletic ability were virtually the *only* things that counted toward a boy's social status, and that I became a high school and college wrestler and then later a college wrestling coach. I also study aggression and heroism. Hence, the theme and tone of the book may have resonated with me more than it will with most other readers. Nevertheless, it is a quick, entertaining read that highlights an aspect of the male experience that is too little discussed, and I recommend it to both academic *and* nonacademic audiences.

## References

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