# REAL MEN ON TOP

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## Discussion Guide

1. In the Preface, Dembroff describes growing up as "a fish out of the water of gender" — never quite certain what character others expected them to play, or whether they were playing it convincingly. Can you think of a moment when you felt you had somehow gotten gender wrong — or, gotten it right? Or have there been times when you felt that you were doing gender right, but others didn't seem to think so? What did that feel like, and what did you do in response? What might these kinds of everyday negotiations suggest about the reach of patriarchy — not only into the lives of people who identify as gender nonconforming, but into all of ours?

2. Part 1 draws on the radical feminist tradition of the late 1960s, which first named patriarchy as a system that structurally benefits men at women's expense. What did that framework make visible — and make possible — that earlier accounts of gender could not? At the same time, the book suggests the model is incomplete. What does this "seesaw" picture miss, and why does that gap matter for understanding who patriarchy harms and how?

3. Some readers will arrive at this book wondering whether its focus on the harm patriarchy does to men risks distracting from feminist work on women's subordination — or implicitly minimizing it. How does the book respond to this concern? Does taking men's harm seriously undermine the goals of women's liberation, or does it deepen the case for it?

4. At the heart of the book is the claim that patriarchy is organized around a three-part hierarchy: Male over Female, Human over Animal, Adult over Child. Together, these axes constitute the mythology of "Man." What do the three axes have in common? And what is gained by seeing them as a unified structure linked by a shared logic rather than as separate, independent hierarchies?

5. One of the book's central arguments is that the mythology of Man is naturalized — presented as reflecting biological reality rather than constructing it. How does patriarchy recruit biology to do this ideological work? What happens to the mythology when we look closely at cases where the biology it invokes is contested, ambiguous, or simply irrelevant to the hierarchies it is being asked to justify?

6. Even in spaces explicitly devoted to the challenges facing men and boys — men's mental health movements, boys' education advocacy, certain strands of masculinity studies — it is often assumed that the concept of the "real man" can be reclaimed and given a more positive content. The book seems to resist this assumption. What, according to Real Men on Top, makes "real man" (and related concepts like "good man") resistant to rehabilitation? Is the problem the specific content these concepts have accumulated, or something more structural — something that happens whenever normative expectations get tied to biological description?

7 Real Men on Top argues that patriarchy harms men not only psychologically but materially, and that this harm has never fallen equally across lines of race and class. The book draws on the history of how images of manhood were constructed partly to exclude black men, colonized men, and working-class men from the category of "real man" — deploying the very logic of feminization, dehumanization, and infantilization that the book identifies as patriarchy's core tools. Can you think of a time where you witnessed ideas of manhood being used to put men down because they were poor, or unemployed, or belonging to a marginalized racial or ethnic group? How was that degradation expressed, and how was it justified? What can these experiences tell us about the collusion between the mythology of Man and mythologies of racial and class distinction?

8 Think about a trait like strength, or gentleness, or the capacity to care for others. We tend to think of some of these as masculine and others as feminine. But where does that association come from? Is it that these traits naturally belong to men or women, or is it something we've been taught? And here's a harder question the book presses us toward: if we could strip away those gender associations, would we simply recover a neutral version of the trait that was always there underneath? Or has the gendering itself changed what strength means, what it feels like to be gentle, what counts as real care? Use examples from your own life or from the text to think this through.

9 Toward the end of Part 2, the book turns to love — not as sentiment but as a way of relating that the mythology of Man makes structurally difficult. The Postscript returns to this theme through the Golden Rule: love others as you love yourself. But patriarchy, the book argues, works precisely by making genuine self-love impossible — setting standards no one can meet, ensuring that shame gets bolted into our basic sense of who we are. What would it take, individually and collectively, to loosen that grip? Can you think of relationships, communities, or practices — in your own life or in the world — that already reach toward something different, however partially or imperfectly?

10 Before we are gendered, the book observes, we are "it": unnamed, depersonalized, not yet located in the social world patriarchy has built. The Postscript returns to this origin and asks what it would mean to see ourselves apart from patriarchy's myths, to ask who we might become without them. That inquiry, the book acknowledges, can feel frightening: it may disrupt long-standing narratives of who we are and what we want. Looking back at your own earliest encounters with gender, what do you notice now that wasn't visible from inside the myth? And what does it feel like to sit with the question of how patriarchy has formed your self-conception rather than reach for an immediate answer?

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