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Feature

REVIEW

Where Have All The Cowboys Gone?

Susan Faludi says men are getting a raw deal in our changing society because they no longer have an important role. Her latest book, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, urges men to find a way back into the civic thread. Are Fight Clubs the answer?

BY MEG DALY
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Susan Faludi
7:30 pm Thursday, Oct. 21
Powell's City of Books 1005 W Burnside St. 228-4651

[Stiffed](#): One Man's View

Imagine a time when men are so frustrated by their lot in life that the only way they can get the testosterone pumping is by beating the shit out of each other and playing lame at illness-support groups. Sound familiar? It's the plot of Portlander Chuck Palahniuk's novel turned big-buzz, Brad Pitt-starring movie, *Fight Club*. It also echoes a prevailing motif of Susan Faludi's new book, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (William Morrow, 416 pages, \$27.50).

Faludi, author of the landmark feminist book *Backlash*, spent seven years researching men, culminating in a divergent theory on gender in America. In *Stiffed*, she contends that consumer culture "has men by the throat" just as much as it does women, so that what a man buys and how he looks matters more than who he is and what he does.

In an phone interview with *Willamette Week*, Faludi explained the origins of her belief that American masculinity has become a product, not an intrinsic quality. Faludi, a contributing editor for *Newsweek* and a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter, began her research for *Stiffed* by setting down her political battle-axes and adopting the tack of actually listening to men. What she heard was that under feminist-phobia lay a real sense of pain and confusion about what it means to be a man anymore. While Faludi by no means defends old-world ideals about male primacy, she found that masculinity meant something very different 75 years ago than it does today. "American masculinity has always been about being the dominant figure in all environments, particularly in the home and in women's lives," Faludi explained. "But there used to be a mitigating idea of grounding your manhood in usefulness, community and society-building. That ideal has been eroded."

It's the ideal of public usefulness that Faludi would like to resurrect. Though she'd refute the antiquated expectation that men wear the pants in the family, Faludi would appreciate pre-World War II men for donning tough, unstylish Carhartts. Nowadays, to be a real man you better have your Calvins, or at the very least your Dockers, carefully

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tailored to reveal your bulging thighs. Faludi found that our ever-growing culture of display and ornamentation--a realm that women have been negotiating for centuries--is stripping men of their humanity the same way it has women. Instead of rising up in protest against their commodification and feminization the way women in the '60s and '70s did, men are stuck, because they're the ones who supposedly have the cultural reins in their hands. Who do men have to fight back against besides a handful of feminist whipping-girls? Men's rage at feeling commodified and disempowered gets channeled into [Waco-like standoffs](#), [Promise Keeper](#) fervor, Citadel cadets gone ballistic, and endless [Rocky-esque](#) posturing before cameras. "When there isn't a society to grow up into in which there are useful adult male roles, then men are left with the swill of consumer fantasies offered up," Faludi said, "in which the way to be a man is to make things explode."

Making things explode is the specialty of *Fight Club's* main character, Tyler Durden. The Fight Club, a late-night, secret society of men who pummel one another into a pulp and walk away feeling freer and more real than they did before, is Durden's brain child. Palahniuk is undisturbed that actual fight clubs are popping up across the country, even right here in Oregon City, where groups of teens gather in a park to take shots at each other. "It's a way of having an extraordinarily chaotic, violent incident which is scheduled and controlled," he told *WW*. This, in Palahniuk's eyes, is a way of solving problems and venting rage.

But can regulated bar-room brawls really address the larger cultural shifts men have experienced in the past half-century? Faludi suggests an antidote sure to be far more threatening, yet more effective than a fist fight or a stint in the army. Faludi says men need to link up with feminists. "It seems to me that feminists are often the only ones on men's side," Faludi explained. "Feminists are really pushing for a fuller life for men, in which they can embrace the kind of nurturance they want to embrace." She cited the way the women's movement has opened up doors for men to become more involved, caring fathers and husbands. "I know in my gut that the ways that women are cosseted, held back and diminished have everything to do with the way that men are restricted, diminished and forced into unnatural ways of being," Faludi offered.

Whether or not men have this same gut feeling remains to be seen. Judging from the initial critical response to *Stiffed*, some men feel more than a little threatened by Faludi's assertion that they've been feminized. Sven Birkerts whined in *Esquire* that Faludi encourages a "self-consciousness [that] is to real masculinity as the query 'Is everything okay?' is to a budding erection--the kiss of death." According to Faludi, many men, like Birkerts, see women as the eyes of the world, deciding how worthy they are. "Women represent a media culture that is looking at men," Faludi responds. Women have long been associated with glamour and display. Now that the cameras are being thrust imposingly upon men, demanding that they be as polished and enticing as a poster girl, men associate this media invasion as a threat of the female gaze. The irony is that the cameras are men's own creation. Like Project Mayhem, the chaotic force that grows out of *Fight Club*, media culture threatens to engulf its makers. Susan Faludi would have men join women in laying down the looking glass and forging renewed social responsibility. She writes that men's task is not "to figure out how to be masculine, rather, their masculinity lies in figuring out how to be human."

Still, I cleave to the hope that Faludi's book will be what one critic called "*The Feminine Mystique* for men." I far prefer Faludi's rallying cry that men should "learn to wage a battle against no enemy" and "act in service of a brotherhood that includes us all" to *Fight Club's* channel for male disillusionment. Palahniuk, however, is an advocate of the organized-violence route. "I'd rather have young men express their rage in controlled settings than in other ways," he says. Palahniuk waxes

nostalgic about the pre-World War II era: "The WPA and the Army used to provide men a means of transcending an old self and building a new, more mature self with expanded capabilities and strength," he says. "I believe strongly that we've lost that second stage of maturity." Faludi would agree that World War II and the subsequent Works Progress Administration era encouraged an important male maturation process, one based on teamwork and society-building. But you won't hear her rallying for more football games, boxing matches or military training. Faludi takes her analysis of men's plight far deeper than advocacy for physical release or fighting a common enemy. Faludi may over-generalize the plight of men at times, but she names a "problem that has no name," to borrow from *The Feminine Mystique*. Faludi wants us to care again about our world, our kids and each other, and to eschew celebrity and glamour. As she said to me, "Caring and passing something on is so essential to one's sense of humanity." Hear, hear!

Stiffed: One Man's View

Men have a certain worry when feminists unzip our manhood: Will this be another call for the guillotine? Susan Faludi isn't one of those simple-minded feminists, but her attempt to put the ruler to guys in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* simply comes off as big-think journalism trying to pass itself off as learned sociology. And with more than a little bit of hypocrisy, Faludi falls victim to the very same forces of popular culture and history that she claims have rendered men existential eunuchs over the past half-century.

Faludi's premise is simple: Before the United States' superpower days, American men were integrated into both history and community; they weren't the bloodlust competitors of today, but rather GI grunts and WPA murals incarnate. As these men built with their hands, nurtured one another and created with their souls, their lives were satisfying, and all was well and good in society. Charming as this picture seems, it is a Panglossian revision of American history. Even the most casual reading of that American era supports the notion that for each Whitmanesque Everyman, America was equal parts Rough Rider and Indian-killer.

Still--and, here, I am tempted to mutter, "Duh!"--Faludi is correct in that something in the character of men came apart as America became a superpower to rival Rome in its glory days. For the first 100 pages of *Stiffed*, it is interesting to observe a third-wave feminist rooting about for man's heart ailment. But after that, it's as though she were cutting with a butter knife. To be fair, delineating the woes of man is as daunting as writing one's name on a grain of sand, and any man with integrity could tell you that the "men's movement" has it all wrong with its call for drumming circles in the forests of the night.

For some reason, Faludi concludes that Los Angeles is ground zero in her anecdotal world. Under Didion's bleached-out sky, she finds laid-off aerospace middle managers, porn stars, Sylvester Stallone, the infamous Spur Posse, the feeble Promise Keepers and--the exception that proves Faludi's rule--laid-off shipyard workers. They're uncentered, unintegral, befuddled victims of a corporate and media culture that has duped them into believing the way to happily-ever-after and babes-on-tap is to replace substance and craftwork with style and consumption. For this patent conclusion, we are asked to soldier through yet more unblinking (and unedited) "reportage" of rabid Cleveland Browns fans, Citadel cadets and participants in the Million Man March.

To a man, these sad characters are media creations, each of them caught in Faludi's reportorial stare during, or soon after, his nanosecond of exposure. Despite her Marxist gloss of American history, this is where Faludi's baby is a breech birth: She expects us to take these men, most of whom barely rise above Cro-Magnon, as proxies for the common man. (Please.) And it is through this lazy sampling of


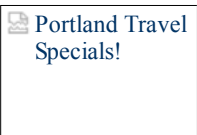

American manhood that she reaches the strained conclusion that men and women are really fighting the same war, that men are essentially 1950s housewives, disengaged from a meaningful existence and nudged into a consumerist maze. Man's only cure is to appropriate the tactics of the post-Friedan generation-- "Burn the jockstrap!"--and thereby toss off the shackles of his oppressors.

Faludi is vaguely onto something here, but her reportorial and analytical lapses give the lie to this book's buzz-- "Feminist Uncovers Truth about Men!"--and make her thesis ring across the land like a muffled bell.

If she has done a service, it is that she's proven women can't fully know men (the converse is also true). Our selves and our worlds are just as mysterious as women's, and it will take a man--one who is heir to all the tantrums of our flesh--to drill into the marrow of men. It would also be useful if he ignored the media's games, truly heard America calling and weren't afraid to pursue its sounds down to the commonest whimper.

--Philip Dawdy

Willamette Week | originally published October 20, 1999

		
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