

Reading Group Guide

How to Be a Man

Stories

Tamara Linse

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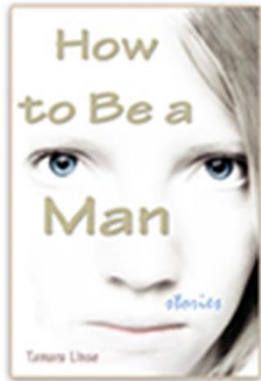
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Stories

How to Be a Man
Men Are Like Plants
A Dangerous Shine
Mouse
Oranges
Hard Men
Nose to the Fence
Control Erosion
Snowshoeing
In the Headlights
The Body Animal
Revelations
Dammed
Wanting

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How to Be a Man Tamara Linse



“Never acknowledge the fact that you’re a girl, and take pride when your guy friends say, ‘You’re one of the guys.’ Tell yourself, ‘I am one of the guys,’ even though, in the back of your mind, a little voice says, ‘But you’ve got girl parts.’” – Birdie, in “How to Be a Man”

A girl whose self-worth revolves around masculinity, a bartender who loses her sense of safety, a woman who compares men to plants, and a boy who shoots his cranked-out father. These are a few of the hard-scrabble characters in Tamara Linse’s debut short story collection, *How to Be a Man*. Set in contemporary Wyoming—the myth of the West taking its toll—these stories reveal the lives of tough-minded girls and boys, self-reliant women and men, struggling to break out of their lonely lives and the emotional havoc of their families to make a connection, to build a life despite the odds. *How to Be a Man* falls within the traditions of Maile Meloy, Tom McGuane, and Annie Proulx.

The author Tamara Linse—writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl—broke her collarbone when she was three, her leg when she was four, a horse when she was twelve, and her heart ever since. Raised on a ranch in northern Wyoming, she earned her master’s in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for an Arts & Letters and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a freelancer. Find her online at tamaralinse.com and tamara-linse.blogspot.com.

Letter from the Author

The stories in *How to Be a Man* were written over the course of the last fifteen years. Some came hot and fast and did not need much fiddling (“Men Are Like Plants,” “Oranges”) and some were the result of years of revision (“Nose to the Fence,” “Mouse”). The oldest story in the collection is “Snowshoeing,” and it’s flaws make me uncomfortable, but I love the

striving to capture something inexplicable that motivated it. The youngest story is “Dammed,” and it’s a good example of my writing process now—I tend to revise extensively as I go and write a lot in my mind before I put it down on the page. Once I get started, it only takes me a session or two to get it all down.

Author’s often get the question, “Where do you get your ideas?” I’ve never had a problem getting ideas, and I mourn the loss of the multitude of ideas that have come and gone, unfulfilled. I think there are lots of ideas out there—it’s just a matter of recognizing them for what they are, and when I’m writing—not blocked—the ideas come thick and fast. I may start with a voice, which happened with “Men Are Like Plants.” I was lying in bed trying to go to sleep, and her voice came to me so strongly I risked my husband’s displeasure—he hates it when I stay up late—and got up to write it down. I wrote most of that story in one sitting. What prompted “Revelations” was a contest a couple of years ago that had to include the year 2010. It got me thinking about the end of the world and Revelations, and so I wondered what a modern-day devil might be like. “Snowshoeing” started with the idea of conveying that feeling of separateness that sometimes comes upon a couple, that realization that you can’t always take your partner for granted. “Oranges” arose in one sitting on a plane coming back from a writer’s conference, the result of guilt over abandoning my kids for a week. “A Dangerous Shine” is based on a real incident that took place at the Buckhorn where I bartended. And on it goes.

Putting together a collection is tough. The idea of revising so many stories at one time and the nakedness that will result from other people seeing them all together is enough to stop the hardiest souls in their tracks. And what order do you put them in? Do you treat them like a mix tape—starting with an attention grabber, turning it up, taking it back, orchestrating peaks and valleys? Or do you arrange them on merit only, putting the best ones first? My protagonists are of different ages—should they be organized by age? I ended up putting what I think of as my best stories first and last, but then also taking into account the mood of the story. I tried to start with some positive stories and then place some of the darkest stories toward the end. I also tried to group them tonally, thematically, and by protagonist, so “Mouse” and “Oranges” are together because they’re about young girls dealing with their parents. “The Body Animal,” “Revelations,” and “Dammed” are together because they’re about the body and violence and alienation. “Wanting” is last because it’s a strong story but it also is historical, while all the others are contemporary.

I’ve always loved when authors tell the story of the story, and so I thought I’d choose a few and talk about how they came into being. “How to Be a Man” was written in response to

“How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie” by Junot Diaz. I had long resisted writing a second-person story because it seemed so cliché—the young writer thinking herself so edgy, taking such an avant garde point of view. Then I read a couple of kick-ass second-person stories, and it began to work on me: Why couldn’t I write one? Then I heard Edwidge Danticat read Diaz’s story and I was hooked. The story wrote itself fairly quickly until I got to the ending—well, the first ending where she becomes a whiskery-chinned old batty. I stopped there. But I didn’t like that ending. I didn’t want her life to end that way. I wanted her to have a chance at happiness. Then I thought, why can’t I have two endings. I’m the god in this little world. I can do whatever I want. So I added the second ending. “Wanting” is another story I wrote in response to a story. Growing up in the West, I had strong Hemingway tendencies—clipped sentences, withheld emotion, huge psychic distance—and so to try to remedy that, I decided to take a great story that was a little more lush to imitate it in sentence construction, paragraphing, even down to where the dialog rests. The story I chose was Karl Iagnemma’s “Children of Hunger.” So I tried to maintain the feel of his story and mimicked it as closely as I could in my own story. It was a very helpful exercise, I think, and I really like the results. “Mouse” began as a writer’s exercise at a conference workshop presided over by Steve Almond. He had good advice about the mouse-killing scene: “A little blood and gore goes a long way.” I later expanded the scene into the story.

I will always write short stories. They are harder than novels, in a way, because they require the precision of a diamond cutter. They have to be so much more concise, clear, compact, and well-written than a novel. In a novel, you can get away with pages of loose extraneous stuff, while a short story must have no fat. And I love reading short stories. I think we’re in a renaissance of good short-story writing, and for that I’m very thankful.

Happy reading!

– Tamara Linse, Laramie, Wyoming, 2013

Discussion Questions

1. In “Control Erosion” and “Men Are Like Plants,” the protagonists’ takes on the world are deeply affected by their jobs. How are Linse’s characters defined by their work, on and off the job? Is there something about living in the American West that makes one’s job more, or less, important? How does class interact with occupation in these stories? How does Linse’s portrayal of people in the West differ from ones you’ve read before?
2. Families are often struggling or even broken in Linse’s fiction. The mother in “Oranges” is doing her best but is drowning in alcohol. The father in “Mouse” is

- nurturing, but his pragmatism often supersedes that. What social forces are at work behind these strained relationships? Is there something specific about the American West that causes strains within families? What do you think will happen to these families after these stories end?
3. The characters in “Revelations” and “Snowshoeing” do some pretty horrible things. Which characters did you identify with? Which did you revile? Is it important to “like” the characters? Is it important that they get their just desserts in the end?
 4. The end of “Nose to the Fence” is positive, while the end to “The Body Animal” is without hope. The ending of “In the Headlights” is ambiguous. Are happy endings important to you? Do you like tidy endings, even if they are tragedies? Do you like “epiphanic” endings, where the protagonist realizes something? Or do you like ambiguous endings that provide closure without resolution?
 5. The romantic relationships in many of these stories have small moments of connection, while overall the characters struggle with loneliness. Are you rooting for these relationships? Or would you like a more traditional romantic arc? Do some of these relationships seem beyond hope?
 6. Violence is a thread snagging underneath the cloth of these stories. In “Hard Men,” a boy becomes a killer and a felon. In “Revelations,” characters not only attack each other, but they also are emotionally violent to each other. The dad in “Mouse” is loving but hard. Do you think the West has a particular tendency toward violence? Or is it peculiarly American? What would be a solution to the problem of violence in these families?
 7. The American West is a particularly masculine culture, and the girls and women in these stories struggle to reconcile what they are with their own self-worth and agency. Is this the case in other cultures around the world? What traits do these societies have in common? How do women cope with this in these stories?
 8. Do you like the title, “How to Be a Man”? Do you think it’s misleading? How does it fit? What does the cover convey about the collection’s contents? If you were going to design a cover for the collection, what images would you include? What genres do these stories fit into?
 9. The history of the American West and the genre of the Western rests heavily in the background of these stories. Where do you see the genre of the Western show through? What would a contemporary Western look like? How do women fit in the modern Western? What other authors have you read that explore the modern West?
 10. What themes do the stories have in common? Do they differ according to whether the protagonist is female or male? Which parts of our society are not represented in these stories? Do you think that’s a failure of imagination on the author’s part or a reflection of contemporary Wyoming?
 11. Linse’s characters, while resourceful and creative, often live anachronistic lives disconnected from technology and other advantages that many of us take for granted. Is there evidence in these stories that the characters are capable of coping with the challenges and demands of daily life, work, and love in the twenty-first century?
 12. These stories take place in rural communities and small towns. How might the plots of the stories and the lives of the characters change if played in urban settings?

About the Author

Tamara Linse grew up on a ranch in northern Wyoming with her farmer/rancher rock-hound ex-GI father, her artistic musician mother from small-town middle America, and her four sisters and two brothers. She jokes that she was raised in the 1880s because they did things old-style—she learned how to bake bread, break horses, irrigate, change tires, and be alone, skills she’s been thankful for ever since. The ranch was a partnership between her father and her uncle, and in the 80s and 90s the two families had a Hatfields and McCoys-style feud.

She worked her way through the University of Wyoming as a bartender, waitress, and editor. At UW, she was officially in almost every college on campus until she settled on English and after 15 years earned her bachelor’s and master’s in English. While there, she taught writing, including a course called Literature and the Land, where students read Wordsworth and Donner Party diaries during the week and hiked in the mountains on weekends. She also worked as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm.

She still lives in Laramie, Wyoming, with her husband Steve and their twin son and daughter. She writes fiction around her job as an editor for a foundation. She is also a photographer, and when she can she posts a photo a day for a Project 365. Please stop by Tamara’s website, www.tamaralinse.com, and her blog, Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl, at tamara-linse.blogspot.com. You can find an extended bio there with lots of juicy details. Also friend her on [Facebook](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#), and if you see her in person, please say hi.

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