

Pronger, Brian. *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. Pp. xii, 305. \$22.95.

Many minority groups divide between those who are basically assimilationists and those who prefer separatism—Reform Judaism versus the Chasidim, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People versus Marcus Garvey, or later Martin Luther King versus Malcolm X, Amerindians who move to the city and buy clothing at Woolworths versus those who remain on the reservation in traditional clothing, Chicanos who speak Spanish and wrap themselves in Mexican culture versus those who speak English and become black-haired Texans. The list could be extended, but my point is to note that gay men can differ on these issues, also. Brian Pronger advocates gay separatism; I favor integration into the larger community.

Pronger has written a book that might better be subtitled: a politically correct feminist view of gay men in sports. His pages are sprinkled with the ritualistic

denunciations of patriarchy, oppressive masculinity, and the suppression of women. Of course, he never mentions that women outlive men, that they hold more wealth, and that 80% of the homeless are men. Such facts would interfere with his attack on allegedly oppressive patriarchy.

For this book Pronger interviewed over thirty athletes, from world-class competitors to those who unwind in recreational sport. Most identified themselves as gay. But when their comments failed to support his ideology, Pronger castigates them as “inauthentic” and self-oppressive.

The most revealing quotation, however, appears on the book’s first page. Pronger opens with a definition of freedom provided by the former rector of a Nazi university. Pronger seems unaware of the irony of quoting an official of a regime that sent thousands of gays to death in concentration camps, and later murdered millions of other people.

But Pronger himself must be cited to present the reader the narrow, ideological nature of his study. According to Pronger, [a] violent rape of a woman is the ultimate in masculinity! (p. 65) [b] Because gays are interested in sex with relative equals, whereas straights prefer the unequal relation of masculine men to feminine women, heterosexuality may be less noble, less democratic (he includes both!), and less ethical than homosexuality. (pp. 78-79) [c] “There has been no biological research conducted on humans independent of culture.” (p. 18) Therefore, Pronger deduces, no scientific study has shown women to be physically inferior to men. (p. 18) However, as all tests on almost all subjects occur within cultures, are the results of those scientific tests to be ignored, too? Pronger would leave us with no science at all. [d] Pronger asserts that when a gay man uses the word “fag,” it is a triumph of gay liberation. (p. 108) If the reader can accept Pronger’s judgments, then he may enjoy plodding through this volume. But I disagree with Pronger on each of the above assessments and many more.

Pronger’s objective is to abolish the “gender myths,” those notions of what is masculine, what, feminine. He contends that gender is not a natural, but a cultural creation. This can be readily proved by observing that what is deemed masculine and feminine varies from culture to culture. Furthermore, some cultures have had more than two genders, like the Amerindian *berdache*. But I ask, where is there a human culture with no distinction between masculine and feminine? In some form, it seems clear, masculinity and femininity are natural, Pronger notwithstanding.

Pronger aims to overthrow the “gender” myth about masculinity. Thus, he is hostile, not only to straight, masculine men, but also to gay, masculine men. Gay athletes represent a possible threat to Pronger’s political agenda, simply by exposing how many masculine gays there are. So Pronger seeks to undermine this threat by proclaiming that gay athletes are not really masculine. Thus, he emphasizes the Judy Garland Bowling League and photographs of gay athletes camping it up, acting feminine. This is why he seeks to discredit some of the gays whom he interviewed when they asserted their masculinity—their assertion defies his thesis. Moreover, he selects his evidence by not including

photographs of gay boxers, gay soccer players, gay basketball players, or gay softball players who might not have been feminine. He knows they exist, but purges them from his book because they are politically incorrect.

Pronger rightly views sports as an apprenticeship in masculinity. But nowhere does he discuss the common view that it is through sports that a youngster will not only learn to be masculine, but also learn to be heterosexual. Pronger's analysis, by equating masculinity with heterosexuality, is simply incapable of asking how a youth engaged in sports can develop into a masculine, gay man.

Pronger notes that for the past few centuries, most gay men were effeminate. This is probably not true. Instead, facing the death penalty, most men who engaged in homosexual acts preferred to remain in the closet. Those who could not "pass," those who were effeminate, might be the only ones "out." But this was probably a small minority of gays. And because many closeted gays were repelled by the gay effeminate culture, they stayed away, except for a possible "quickie."

The importance of gay liberation, which has been perking up for over a century, is that it has allowed gay men to congregate without fear of imprisonment. A new culture developed, and some of the most important aspects of this new culture, which Pronger concedes, revolve around gay sports and the Gay Games. But Pronger accuses butch gays of "passing" as straights. I suggest that masculine gay men do not pass, they are simply men who happen to be gay. Rather, the feminine gay man may be so brainwashed into thinking that because he is gay, he must act like a woman. From this perspective, the transexual is not, as Pronger maintains, an illustration of anti-orthodox gendering, but rather a gay passing as a woman. Similarly, those who seek to imitate women, in drag or out, are trying to pass. Usually, their imitations are so inadequate that everyone laughs.

To Pronger, homosexuality is not a series of sexual acts with members of the same sex, but a sensibility, a way of knowing. By denying that engaging in homosexual activity makes one a homosexual, Pronger, by definition, seeks to declare the majority of gays to be straight. Then he can argue that most gays of the past were effeminate. Aside from the aberration of the 1970s and 80s, when a masculine style like that of the Village People dominated, Pronger declares that most gay men remain effeminate. Pronger urges the gay attack on masculinity to continue. In the process Pronger seeks to expel most gay men from the gay community. Pronger's feminist agenda requires him to excommunicate from the gay world most gay Catholics, gay Republicans, gay masculine men, and thus, many gay athletes.

There are amusing and informative anecdotes about gays and sports in Pronger's volume. But that is not the theme of his book. Pronger entered the arena to demolish masculinity, but with Pronger's cracked politics, faulty logic, skewed examples, and ideological jargon, masculinity easily triumphed over him.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Hugh Murray