

## What's wrong with men? A writer looks at Michael Douglas characters for clues

In “What Is Wrong With Men,” critic Jessa Crispin explores the rise of misogyny in today’s culture through an unusual lens

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Review by Judith Warner

In the late 1980s and early '90s, Michael Douglas starred in several Hollywood blockbusters that gave a sensationalist twist to the era’s culture wars over women’s status and control of their bodies. In “Fatal Attraction,” he played a family man who betrayed his lovely homemaker wife for a brief affair with a sexually liberated, irresistibly seductive and ultimately deranged career woman. In “Basic Instinct,” he portrayed a down-on-the-heels detective whose fragile recovery from addiction and personal tragedy was cruelly derailed by a sexually voracious, demonically smart, wealthy and beautiful woman writer, who was also — maybe! — an icepick-wielding man-murderer. And in “Disclosure,” he was a hardworking husband and father who lost an important promotion to a sexually predatory, professionally undeserving, vindictively scheming ex-girlfriend, who falsely accused him of sexual harassment.

Meanwhile, in Kansas, Jessa Crispin was growing up in a small, conservative town, where HBO — “decadent” for that place and that time — was bringing her movies that taught her all about money and success, ambition and “the killer instincts” she’d need to thrive in a life far away from home, she writes in [“What Is Wrong With Men.”](#) She saw Michael Douglas as a “real man.” Three decades and several books later — most recently, “My Three Dads: Patriarchy on the Great Plains” — Crispin decided it was time to look at him, and at real men, through a new lens.

She couldn’t have chosen a better moment. The worst elements of the very trashiest Michael Douglas movies — the blatant misogyny, the normalization of sexual assault, the general sense that good men can’t say or do what they want or tell the honest truth while women get away with murder — are back in full force. Those sentiments help win elections, animate internet comedy and fill a very noisy manosphere, and they have given cover to sweeping rollbacks of federal rules aimed at fighting sexual harassment and rape, lack of access to birth control, and [wage inequality](#), all in the name of combating “[gender ideology extremism](#).” Just [last month](#), Amazon MGM Studios’ United Artists announced the news of an “anti-woke” reboot of “Basic Instinct,” with an enthusiastic sign-on by the film’s original screenwriter, [Joe Eszterhas](#), who has been a Donald Trump supporter. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

It's not hard to trace the style of today's particularly rageful male dysphoria to the cultural moment — captured so encyclopedically in Susan Faludi's 1991 bestseller, "Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women," and 1999 follow-up, "Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man" — that made Michael Douglas a box office superstar. Crispin has done it through a close reading — a very, very close reading — of nine Michael Douglas films, arguing that through him, or more precisely, through "the character he embodied in film during the era of the patriarchy's most dramatic changes ... and from his movements and his injuries we can theorize what is wrong with men." She hops through the familiar touch points in our recent economic history: deindustrialization, banking deregulation, financialization, privatization and vastly increased inequality, weaving them into a sweeping story of declining male fortunes.

She views all of that — fiction and history — through a lens of Marxist-feminist critical theory, to which she adds some recent ideas and language from social justice movements. And then she comes to some striking conclusions: Patriarchy is "over." "Postpatriarchy" — in which we now live — is "worse." That's because patriarchy, in which "the top positions" were "reserved exclusively for white men," at least carried with it "values like stewardship, sacrifice, and charity," she writes; postpatriarchy cares only about money, and its smoke screen, "meritocracy," is a "system that gives advantage to the already wealthy and has allowed the middle class to erode and protections for the lower classes to disappear." In such a stark world of winners and losers, most men are, understandably, very angry. But, Crispin writes, there is hope: If they could just give up their old "internalized ideas about male privilege and patriarchal power," if they would "learn to become creators, artists, innovators, collaborators and diplomats," men could, at long last, find "true liberation."

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You may have questions. In fact, you might take issue with quite a few of Crispin's assertions: Was the period before, during and after World War II really "American patriarchy's golden age," given male job losses in the Great Depression, the violence men encountered in Europe and Japan, and the return to a home front that had, in many ways, moved on without them? (And, for that matter, is it really truthful to say that the "fantasy" of "the brave, heroic young men who liberated Europe and the Pacific was mostly manufactured by Hollywood"?) Is it accurate to assert that angry men flock to overtly misogynistic masculinity influencers such as Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson because they "are picking up on nostalgic versions of masculinity in order to fight against the hedonism and meaninglessness of contemporary consumer life?"

And is it right to describe one of the "broadest bases of new support for Trump" as "the disappointed. The middling. The people for whom things worked out okay but not to their full expectations ... the third best salesperson this quarter. The students who didn't quite get into the university that was their first choice?" (Do exit polls now ask about job performance and college placement? Or is this just gratuitous?)

But you can't get too caught up in all that. In "What is Wrong With Men," Crispin is employing the tools of critical theory, and by doing theory, she can cover a lot of bases just by writing knowingly about "patriarchy" and "capitalism" and "patriarchal capitalism." The author, previously, of "Why I am Not a Feminist," she is also a professional contrarian, which pretty much means she can bounce off others to naysay whenever so moved. That dual orientation allows her to construct bizarrely telescoped timelines, without too much worry about anachronism. (Or sourcing: In her extremely short bibliography, Crispin mentions "Backlash" but, oddly, skips "Stiffed.")

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She also avoids any real detail on current politics or policy or political figures; Trump gets his most sustained attention as an example of a late-1980s man successfully “controlling the narrative” during his divorce from his first wife, Ivana. But then, that’s Crispin’s theory in action: Anything that “keeps the focus on the individual, rather than on the system that created them,” is a no-no.

With its elevation of rhetoric over well-informed argument, “What Is Wrong With Men” is truly a book for our times. It will no doubt appeal to the kinds of young readers who talk fluently about “late capitalism” and who see traditional politics as pointless. It may also provide new fuel for those who view intellectuals as out-of-touch super-ideologues, ignorant and disdainful of regular people. That’s not terribly helpful — and it’s undoubtedly not the outcome that Crispin desired.

*Judith Warner’s most recent book is “And Then They Stopped Talking to Me: Making Sense of Middle School.”*

## **What Is Wrong With Men**

Patriarchy, the Crisis of Masculinity, and How (of Course) Michael Douglas Films Explain Everything

By Jessa Crispin.

Pantheon. 288 pp. \$27

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### **What readers are saying**

The comments reflect a range of opinions on the portrayal of male characters in Michael Douglas's films from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some commenters argue that these films, particularly "Wall Street" with its "Greed is good" mantra, captured the zeitgeist of the era,... [Show more](#)

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