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## Plight of the Beta Male

René Martínez

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## Plight of the Beta Male

*René Martínez (bio)*

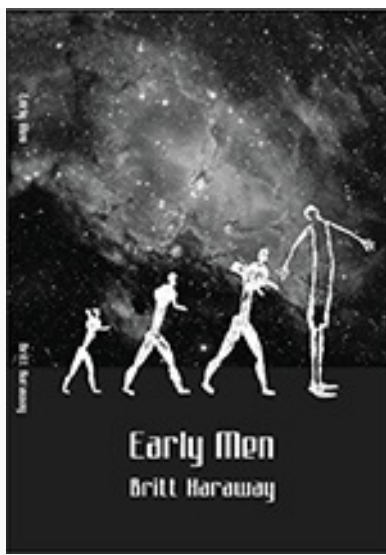
*EARLY MEN*

**Britt Haraway**

Lamar University Literary Press

[www.lamar.edu/literary-press/fiction/early-men.html](http://www.lamar.edu/literary-press/fiction/early-men.html)

206 Pages; Print, \$19.95



What does it take to be a man? For much of history, concepts of masculinity have been rooted in physical appearance and strength of character. We're told "real" men should be tall and handsome, their actions brave and noble. Those who don't possess these qualities may be doomed to mediocre lives. Britt Haraway's debut story collection *Early Men* focuses on men who have fallen short of society's traditional expectations and who are motivated by fear of inadequacy.

The first story is "Bad Joke Bob" and features a postal equipment salesman making a sudden visit to an old fraternity brother and his wife. Bob is basically Michael Scott, Steve Carell's strange and needy character from NBC's comedy *The Office* (2005–2013), except without flashes of genuine charm and humor. As Haraway's protagonist claims credit for introducing the couple and fumes about not having been invited to their wedding, it becomes clear he doesn't recognize personal boundaries or understand his presence is obtrusive. Indeed, he never experiences a simple epiphany: strongly imposing on others usually results in being pushed away. Bob is clueless because, throughout his life, he's rarely received positive social recognition. This is revealed through several memories, one of which involves his time as the Conquistador, a high school mascot:

To me it meant strutting around the sidelines with a sword with the permission to do any outrageous thing you wanted because you believed from the first that you were right. It was how I thought of all the men that had been in my life. They were slayers and self-righteous and generally had a lot of cultural success. It felt wonderful to be in those clothes, until I realized it was just me in the fake muscles—only the idea of me having power made people feel so amused.

Other men have always seemed more worthy of respect, love, and

prosperity, so Bob is engaged in a never-ending quest to prove himself to anyone and everyone.

The collection continues with “Knoxville Dead.” The main character is a college student named Colin who begins an affair with Hedwig, his German instructor. Like any good beta male, Colin reveres his lover and makes sacrifices to ensure her comfort: “When we started dating, I dropped out of school because she felt bad every time my name came up on her roll.” Hedwig is married to a soldier stationed in Iraq, a situation that presents Haraway with a perfect chance to contrast characters on the opposite ends of the manhood spectrum. Unfortunately, the author doesn’t seize this opportunity and instead just takes readers through Colin’s life as a typical mama’s boy: “I didn’t stay with Hedwig that night, because Mama and I had a date to watch the meteors.”

A weakness is that *Early Men* glosses over the psychological effects experienced by those not cut from the dominant mold of masculinity. In real life, these men might be met with cold shoulders, expressions of disgust, or outright dismissals. Such treatment leads to insecurity and serious issues with personal identity. Most of Haraway’s protagonists suffer from these problems, and it’s easy to imagine their pasts as bullied children, broken-hearted boyfriends, and lost souls. This subject matter is actually quite interesting and worthy of exploration; a book showing how these damaged characters attempt to function in a society that doesn’t value them could be important and eye-opening. *Early Men* isn’t that book, though, and just skims the surface of any emotional struggles.

Still, the collection has a few strong points. The best story is “Wall Doxy” and follows Leonard, a pedophile, as he finds an injured and unconscious girl at a state park:

Her pink coat was unzipped, falling off her shoulder. Her white T-shirt peeked through, the edge of the short-sleeved shirt, the ends ruffled, like petals. He bent to his knees, the leaves creaking and breaking under his...

They were, tragically, optimistic about possibilities of creating freedom from unfreedom. Two examples suffice. When black settlers established themselves in the 1790's in Sierra Leone—a move Equiano saluted—they sought “legitimate trade” in goods to replace “illegitimate trade” in slaves. They learned that the social and even the natural environment around them was structured on slavery. Their paths were footpaths formed by slave traders and their captives. There was no pre-slavery state to recover or prior freedom to re-create. Similarly, when African Americans of the Revolutionary era argued

that a new day meant freedom for all, they were struck down by countless ways unfreedom could be enforced even after abolition of slavery. It was not that they proved unable to re-create freedom but that freedom proved extremely difficult to create. This was no mystery to early black thinkers.

Concepts like recuperation define slavery and other forms of unfreedom as thinner and shallower than they were. If there was a fall into enslavement, there was, on a human scale, nothing before the fall. In what sense, then, is the term “fall” useful? The rhetoric of lost freedom had immense potency in

the Atlantic world, but the reality was that liberty had never been lost because it had never been possessed. Its creation began in the era Wheelock studies. As he writes, black men and black women were among the creators.

*John Saillant is a professor at Western Michigan University in the departments of English and History.*

## PLIGHT OF THE BETA MALE

### EARLY MEN

Britt Haraway

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René Martínez



shoulder like dough. With the backside of his hand he brushed the blood away from her eyelid. The blood was not dry yet and came away easily, and he kept brushing her skin, even though the blood was gone. Her skin was impossibly smooth.

Here, for the first time, Haraway ventures into dangerous and exciting territory, with tension coming from Leonard's battle with his sexual urges. “Wall Dosey” shows talent, and it's a shame Haraway doesn't take more chances like this one.

In 2006, journalist Nora Vincent published *Self-Made Man: One Woman's Year Disguised as a Man*. The book is a non-fiction account of Vincent's undercover adventure into the realm of manhood. Disguised as “Ned,” Vincent makes male friends, interacts with women, and even visits a male therapy group in an attempt to intimately understand her opposite gender. Her conclusion—that many men suffer in silence—creates awareness of the frequently-crushing weight of masculine expectations. *Early Men* seems to circle the same idea, and Haraway could look at it free from Vincent's journalistic restrictions, but he doesn't to any reasonable depth.

The truth is *Early Men* offers little that's new for readers to consider.

*René Martínez is a writer based in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. His work has appeared in Boulevard and The Texas Review.*





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