

# Breaking the “First Rule of Masculinity”: A Conversation with Thomas Page McBee

By Morgan Benson

*Thomas Page McBee is an author, film and TV writer, reporter, and “questioner of masculinity” (New York Times). His Lambda award-winning debut memoir, Man Alive, was named a best book of the year by NPR Books, BuzzFeed, Kirkus, and Publisher’s Weekly. His “refreshing [and] radical” (The Guardian) follow-up, Amateur, explores the vexed relationship between masculinity and violence with a beginner’s mind. In the course of reporting the book, Thomas became the first transgender boxer to ever fight in Madison Square Garden. Thomas’s recent television cred- its include Tales of the City (2019, Netflix) and The L Word: Generation Q (Showtime). A former senior editor at Quartz, Thomas’s essays and reportage have appeared in the New York Times, Playboy, The Atlantic, and others; and he has written columns for the Rumpus, Pacific Standard, Condé Nast’s Them, and Teen Vogue. Thomas has taught at the City University of New York’s graduate school of journalism and serves as an advisor for West Virginia University’s graduate school of journalism. He speaks internationally on the intersection of gender and culture and is currently developing several projects focused on alternative US histories and counter-narratives, as well as adapting Amateur for the screen.*

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## MORGAN BENSON

Thomas, it’s so nice to be speaking with you today. I first came across your books and reporting when I was looking for trans perspectives on masculinity and manhood while going through my own transition, for lack of a better word, a few years ago. You’ve now published two books: *Man Alive*, which you’ve described as a kind of coming-of-age memoir, mostly about your life prior to your transition; and *Amateur*, which explores specifically the relationship between masculinity and violence through your reporting and your own experience training for and becoming the first trans man to ever [box] in Madison Square Garden.

Your work has really resonated with me and allowed me to explore some of my own questions and issues more clearly. So, I’m excited to chat further and thank you again for taking the time.

## THOMAS PAGE MCBEE

Thanks, I’m excited as well. Masculinity has been an interest of mine for years, and it’s always great to meet people who are also interested in having conversations about it. The conversation has really shifted since I started reporting on the “masculinity crisis” in 2011.

## MORGAN

We talk about masculinity, but it can be such a tough concept to understand. I’m wondering, in all your research and exploration for yourself and your books, have you landed anywhere? How do you understand masculinity now?

## **THOMAS**

I feel of two minds. On an intellectual and academic level, I'm all for expanding masculinity until it's so diluted in its definition that anyone can say, "I identify with masculine qualities," or "I am a man." And why should we have to define what that means, really? I talked to a lot of sociologists and other folks who think about this all the time, and so I understand that in some ways it's a fool's errand to even try to define what masculinity means. Because in doing that, you almost always have to create a binary with femininity, and then that reproduces patriarchy, and so on.

I also understand that, as I'm sure you can relate to, I'm a man and I'm trans. And I obviously believe that means something, or else, why would I have ever transitioned, you know? There is something spiritually real about my masculinity, or I wouldn't have gone through this process. I wanted to believe that it was all just intellectual or social, and that didn't work for me personally.

## **MORGAN**

"Something spiritually real" about your masculinity—I like that phrase. It makes me think about how meaningful and complex our understanding of masculinity is. How would you describe what it looks like broadly in our society?

## **THOMAS**

To some degree, what we're socialized to think of it as is a set of traits and behaviors that are affiliated with cis men as we currently see them in the world. There's the toxic version of that, dominance-based behaviors and strategies that are all about maintaining the social structure that we all live in, and then there's the more subtle aesthetics of masculinity. To some degree, most people associate masculinity with things that testosterone produces, like facial hair and physicality.

Like most people, I used to think that testosterone causes aggression. I think that's part of why, when I started taking testosterone, with the ways I was feeling in the world, I was sort of having this moment of crossfire again. I thought maybe it is just the hormones, and maybe men really are just violent. But then I talked to a neurobiologist at Stanford, Robert Sapolsky, who told me that testosterone doesn't cause aggression. That's one of the main myths about testosterone.

## **MORGAN**

I think it's fair to say that association between testosterone and aggression is still alive and well. If it's a myth, where did that come from, and what does testosterone actually do?

## **THOMAS**

It has been shown to cause status-seeking, at least in primates. They've also done economic games with people in which the way to win is by cooperating, and in those games, the men with the highest testosterone levels are reliably the most cooperative. But then if you give a man a

shot of a placebo, and you tell him it's testosterone, then he acts like a jerk in those same games.<sup>i</sup> And that, to me, indicates that the beliefs we have about what masculinity is are deep, and they're not easily eradicated. What we think of as what masculinity means is valuable to know, given how powerful it can be.

## **MORGAN**

Oh wow, I hadn't heard about that study, but it really is enlightening. There are so many narratives we hold about what masculinity is and about what it means to be a man.

## **THOMAS**

And you're never supposed to question what it means to be a man. You're just supposed to police it or uphold it. And if you fail at it, then you're supposed to say, "Okay, I guess I'm just not that kind of guy." But you're not supposed to ever even ask what does it even mean, you know, to be a man?

## **MORGAN**

Right, you've called it the "first rule of masculinity," to not talk about it or question it. I struggle with how traditional masculinity excludes anything feminine, even really important human things. How do you own and express your masculinity without rejecting aspects of yourself that might be perceived as feminine?

## **THOMAS**

Yeah, I think that was the point of the book I wrote and that whole journey. That is the issue, which is that, literally to define masculinity, we do so in opposition to femininity.

That's the sort of toxic way masculinity is also defined. I am a man by not being a woman; the more away I am from being a woman, then the more manly I am, and that's what makes men real. You can police each other for failing to be men, by which we mean, acting more like women than men or acting more "like gay men." And I'm saying all this based on research.

This is that whole idea of the "man box," which is that kids as young as 12 in classrooms across North America can answer the question, "What goes in the man box?" They say things like "Men don't cry; men don't show emotion." This is all deeply ingrained stuff, and it's really problematic. For me, I saw it in those first few years after my transition. Every way I was behaving that had any relationship to my life before my transition, I felt the process of socialization. In grief, for example, it was okay if I was angry but not if I was sad. And it was all subtle usually.

## **MORGAN**

Absolutely. I transitioned when I was 25, and that shift in socialization was really difficult to experience and even just understand. I'm still trying to figure out what feels authentic.

## **THOMAS**

It is confusing, but within all of that mess, I think that there's an opportunity for people who don't have or don't want to have certain traits that are associated masculinity to sort of pick and choose. Within this cultural context that we all understand and within the aesthetic context we all understand, you can say "I resonate with this piece about what being a man means or what masculinity is, but not this piece."

In some ways I was more masculine before my transition, because as a butch person, I really wanted to show the world my masculinity more aesthetically. And maybe even like, interpersonally. I had different dynamics with people in my life where it was sort of celebrated or romanticized more. And now in this body, it clearly creates a different experience for other people when I do the same things. So, I've had to reimagine what being a man means in terms of my impact in the world.

## **MORGAN**

That's so interesting, and touches upon some of the tension between masculinity as a personal trait and its interplay with gender. Before we get into that a little more, I'm wondering if you'd be willing to talk more about your own experience generally. How do you express your gender?

## **THOMAS**

My gender and my physical embodiment are kind of the same, and I didn't always feel that way. I thought for a long time that just being a human being and expressing myself through that humanity was who I was. And I wanted to live, again, in that world where that could just be true, but gender and race are the primary ways that we mediate our experiences of each other. I don't like that about how we are in the world, but I know that's a fact.

Over time, I realized what I need to do is figure out how to, rather than sort of trying to shoehorn my masculinity into my humanity, maybe I need to really try to shine my humanity through my masculinity. Because, especially aesthetically, I'm so invested in my male body, and I mean that in a good way. I am happy. I did experience dysphoria, and now I don't. I want to be an embodied person in my body that is male, at least in terms of how people perceive me and in terms of my own self-identity.

So, I think my masculinity comes through my embodiment. Instead of rejecting masculinity outright—which again, prior to my reporting on this—I felt like that was sort of the way that people in my life knew how to handle these expectations of masculinity. They would either say, "That's just how guys are," or "I'm not that kind of guy." And it felt like one is dropping out and sort of acting like none of this is happening around you and that you're not in this structure yourself. And the other is making things innate that I know, again, as a trans person, just aren't innate because if that's just how guys are, what kind of guy am I, you know? And where did I come from?

## **MORGAN**

Thank you for sharing that. It's powerful to hear how you reconcile owning your own embodiment and way of being with not trying to drop out of what's around you or explaining it away.

### **THOMAS**

Yeah, I think about my gender now in a more holistic sense. I'm a man in the world, and there's a responsibility and an accountability to that that's really important, and I try to really be mindful of that. Doing things in this body that go counter to what's expected of it is an important part of my gender expression too. Compassion, trying to be available for things that are socialized out of boys (and certainly I experienced being sort of socialized out of me, even in adulthood) like vulnerability, intimacy, connecting—all of those aspects of being a person. I try to do that in my daily life, consciously, but also publicly in my expression of myself.

### **MORGAN**

That's interesting. I want to dig a little deeper and ask more about that relationship between our sense of our maleness and masculinity because I've always known queer spaces with other butch women like I identified at one time. So, I don't think my understandings of masculinity and maleness have been the same for me. Do you have anything to add on that distinction here?

### **THOMAS**

Well, I think the biggest thing I've learned from my own work is how deep the biases I had run—sexist biases, obviously racist biases, and my own internalized transphobia. Having a body that's not in the dominant group doesn't make you not internalize the knowledge that the dominant group is also living within. So I think that it's important that people who might feel, like, "My understanding of this is different because I'm in a different body" [to] not just walk away from the conversation. I think it's worth investigating. Even if you're not a cis man or a trans man, it's literally impossible for you not to have internalized the same messaging about masculinity that everyone else has.

I do think, though, the truth is, if you're not a man, you're not rewarded in the same way. In fact, you're often punished for embodying that same masculinity, which I'm sure you know for a fact, and I certainly know. So, I think it's a lot more complex when we're talking about masculinity on bodies that aren't perceived as male, at least in sort of a physical way. But I think that, for those individual people, it's still worth really investigating their own relationships to gender and perpetuating stereotypes and so on.

### **MORGAN**

I appreciate you noting that navigating this and just the world generally is different for different people in different bodies and how we need to take that into account.

### **THOMAS**

I also feel sensitive because I understand that when you're in a body, and people aren't taking you at face value of who you are, it can be important to really try to show who you are. And if the language you have to show it is the same language everyone else does and it's problematic, it's a lot harder to just walk away from that and say, "Well, I don't want to perpetuate harm." I think it's too complicated to ask, for example, butch women to just examine their own internalized issues around masculinity and just perform their healthy masculinity, end of story. I think you have to see everything within the bigger system of what people are dealing with and up against.

I think it's the same thing with Black men and masculinity when we know we police Black men, literally, in this country for performances of masculinity deemed threatening that we not only encourage but require of all men to prove "realness," aka worth as human beings. So how do you live through that double bind? Does that mean that you're less responsible for your behavior if you are in a marginalized group? Of course not. But you have to see what's happening, understand where people are coming from and what they're up against, and think about who's being harmed and who's doing the harm when you're asking people to examine their own dynamics with gender.

Even though the expectations, in some ways, are equally applied across at least male bodies, they're not equally policed across male bodies. I think the understandings of being masculine are clear to people no matter if they were born male or not or if they live as male or not.

## **MORGAN**

I think that can be hard to do when someone has done harm or is doing harm. Understanding the forces that they're dealing with and what accountability might then look like, and for whom—it's difficult.

## **THOMAS**

Yeah. I think it's hard to hold a butch person performing their masculinity to the same level of accountability as you would a white cis man, even if the behaviors are similar, because there are different motivations, rewards, and levels of oppression in response to that. It's complicated, and people need to understand that it's not a simple and black-and-white issue around whether or not you have privilege, or whether or not you're in a "man box," or whether or not your masculinity is toxic.

## **MORGAN**

That makes sense. We need to be careful to not over-generalize about people's experiences. Being a trans person and experiencing the world responding to you on both sides of binary really illuminates that for me.

## **THOMAS**

For me too. When I was dating, before I met my wife, I had a queer friend who was trying to set me up on dates and trying to give me some feedback about dating women, even though I'd done that my whole life. She said, "I think you're just too vulnerable." And I don't even know what that actually meant because it's not like I was any different. And in fact, I'd gotten the opposite feedback before my transition: that I seemed mean or scary because I had a female body, and I was behaving in a way that was masculine. After my transition, I was getting the opposite feedback for the exact same behaviors, so it felt like any way I was behaving that was outside a norm of a binary was problematic to some people for some reason.

## **MORGAN**

That's really stressful and also eye-opening.

Can you say more about what you learned from speaking with experts about this interplay of gender identity, masculinity, and femininity?

## **THOMAS**

So, a lot of my questions started to be about how the things that make us human, as the psychologist Niobe Way says, are things that are associated with being feminine, like connection, intimacy, the ability to listen, vulnerability.<sup>ii</sup> And I learned that we do systemically socialize those out of boys, and then we tell boys that's what being a man is. And then we move through the world as men, those of us who are men, and we think we're failing at masculinity if we're behaving in ways that are associated with being a woman.

That's obviously sexist and wrong and harmful to not just the people around us, but to ourselves. That's why men have higher rates of suicide, for example, and higher reported rates of loneliness and deaths of despair. That's all clearly coming from a lack of connection.

## **MORGAN**

Stepping into that socialization later in life was really jarring for me. Can you speak more to how you navigate it now?

## **THOMAS**

So, my solution has been, and continues to be, asking, "Why? What are we talking about? Why do people think that masculinity or being a man is about rejecting being feminine in any way?" And then, once you understand the bigger structural issues at play, I think as a man, you can be empowered through that knowledge to say, "Fuck that, I am a man." And also, of course, I'm not immune to internalizing more toxic notions about masculinity, but I'm not going to continue to behave from a place as if I agree with those notions, nor am I going to say nothing and therefore continue to uphold the structures built on that silence.

I like these qualities that I have that are feminine. And in fact, everything I read, everyone I talk to, everything about my own experience tells me that these qualities help me and other people, so

why would I want to lose them? Why wouldn't I want to hold on to them? And my goal is to be a pro-social human being who contributes to the world and certainly doesn't harm the world in being who I am. So why not try to sustain the things about myself that come from this knowledge I got, this lucky fact of my own socialization prior to my transition where I learned all this stuff and I didn't unlearn it? And now I'm an adult with frontal lobes who can be like, "Why would I fucking want to not be vulnerable? Or not have intimacy in my life?" That's terrible.

## **MORGAN**

That's really inspiring for me as a trans person, and I think empowering for all men who want to navigate masculinity and hold on to their whole selves. To close, I'd love to ask, what do you think is the best way to engage more men in this discussion?

## **THOMAS**

To me, it's about strategically figuring out a way to talk to cis men who have not thought about this, with an approach that gives them a way to still feel a connection to their masculinity. Because the way masculinity works, if anybody tries to take that away from you or undermine it, that's seen as a threat. That creates fragile masculinity, and that can even lead to more of a violent or negative reaction from the man involved, or at least a shutting down.

Maybe there's a way to engage men about masculinity with care taken to not undermine their own experience of their gender, but highlight instead the ways that this can cause harm to you and also the people in your immediate life, and don't you want to make things better? And you're not any less of a man for taking care of that.

## **MORGAN**

Absolutely. Thomas, thank you so much for speaking with me and the work that you've done in exploring this. I hope we'll get to continue this discussion, and I look forward to hearing more from you.

## **THOMAS**

Of course, and thank you for the conversation.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas Page McBee, *Amateur: A reckoning with gender, identity and masculinity* (Edinburgh: Canongate. 2019).

<sup>ii</sup> Niobe Way, *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection* (London: Harvard University Press. 2013)