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Men Behaving Badly

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By Michael Lindgren
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What ever happened to the American Man? You know, the one who bullied and swore and drank his way through novels full of cigarette smoke, big cars and red meat? The one who'd abandon his family for a prostitute, or coerce his girlfriend into a threesome, or sleep with the housekeeper after murdering his wife? What happened to all those Rabbits and Portnoys and Rojacks and Wapshots and Herzogs? And does anyone really miss them?

Judging from a sampling of recent male-penned fiction, the answer is no, not really. The five short novels at hand suggest that men want to be bad boys, kind of, but they can't quite get there. They're too comfortable, and they like women too much, to be engaged in all that operatic despair.

The closest thing to a Hemingway hero in this bunch is Sheriff Lucian Wing, the embattled lawman in Castle Freeman Jr.'s "All That I Have" (Steerforth; paperback, \$13.95). When a Vermont state trooper finds a naked man tied to a tree, for Wing it's the beginning of a run of knotty problems with his mercurial wife, intransigent underlings and Russian mobsters. Wing steers by the advice he was given by his aging mentor, which is 50 percent judicious wisdom and 50 percent cornpone gibberish. Freeman endows his leading man with a likable calm, though, and keeps the action moving crisply along, making "All That I Have" an estimable sequel to his first novel "[Go With Me](#)" (2007).

In "Nothing but a Smile" (Pantheon, \$24.95), Steve Amick's jaunty romp through World War II-era Chicago, Wink Dutton spends most of his time trying not to feel foolish as he struggles to keep up with Sal Chesterton. She's the wife of his army buddy who's still stationed abroad, but she's keeping the home fires warm by producing homemade pinup photos starring herself. Discharged from the service for a minor

wound, Wink finds himself living down the hall from her and helping her make those salacious pictures. Amick's tone is PG-13-dirty and cotton-candy light; he seems to consider a woman who profits cannily from pornography an avatar of feminism -- admittedly a far cry from the Hefner approach.

Compared to these two, Kieran Sweeney has it easy; all this guy has to do is stay out of the way while Kitty, his feisty fiancée, dispenses with a troublesome pig, an officious absentee landlord and a pair of 200-year-old ghosts, all of whom, the reader senses immediately, are badly overmatched. The plot in Joseph Caldwell's "The Pig Comes to Dinner" (Delphinium, \$22.99) -- the second volume in his [porcine trilogy](#) -- is a rickety armature of cheerful nonsense about spirits, seers and castles, frightfully bonny and twee and Irish. Caldwell's arch Wodehousian tone comes off as either hilarious or wearing; either way, it speeds by.

The adult lost boy in Patrick Somerville's marvelous debut, "The Cradle" (Little, Brown, \$21.99) starts out beholden to his pregnant wife's obdurate demand that he retrieve a long-lost cradle. On this dubious premise Somerville builds a road narrative that gradually accumulates the mythic echoes and dreamlike inevitability of allegory. Matt's search for the cradle takes on a picaresque nobility; he's like a blue-collar Odysseus, crisscrossing the Midwest in his quest to return home to his Penelope. What gives "The Cradle" its potent emotional resonance, however, is the way Somerville's prose calmly, relentlessly pulls at the Gothic skein of family tragedies that lurks behind the peeling paint and sagging porches, where a sense of inherited sin settles like a thick fog.

Which brings us to a tale told by a schizophrenic teenager, [John Wray](#)'s dizzyingly seductive "Lowboy" (Farrar Straus Giroux, \$25). Wray's protagonist is on the lam from a mental institution, loose among the commuters and winos and rolling thunder of the Manhattan subway. Making your central character deeply insane is, of course, a risky and ambitious trick, but Wray carries it off with a fluid, inventive style that rises at times to a frightening pitch. Lowboy is an amplified hero for our times; despite his violence and craziness and incoherence, he is fundamentally sweet and in search of love.

All of these protagonists are men in a curiously post-feminist way. They're defined not by a thrusting, swaggering, consuming ego-force, but by resilience and loyalty, by a hard-earned sense of limitations and boundaries. We've come a long way, baby.

Lindgren is a writer and musician who divides his time between New York City and Pennsylvania.

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