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Yarra Valley Grammar incident highlights urgent need to end misogyny

By [Rosemary Sorensen](#) | 14 May 2024, 4:00pm | 6 comments | [E](#)



Two boys from Yarra Valley Grammar School have been expelled after creating a list ranking female students (Screenshot via YouTube)

A recent incident where schoolboys ranked female classmates as 'unrapeable' has reminded us of the need to tackle the misogynistic culture allowing this behaviour to thrive, writes [Rosemary Sorensen](#).

*** CONTENT WARNING: This article discusses rape**

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IT'S TIME TO get back to some basics about sex and gender.

Men who were themselves abused within institutional systems that protected violence and bullying are who we need to hear from if something is to change. Many people pursing their lips in disgust at the [boys of Yarra Valley Grammar](#), who ranked girls according to how "unrapeable" they are, are the same people who actually believe that boys should be instilled with warrior beliefs and girls will ever be judged by their looks.

Check out so-called entertainment, from film to music and advertising, with all its glamorisation of violence and objectifying of bodies. It's weirdly hypocritical not to see how young people might get it very wrong.

There were still alpha-male stereotypes behind the revolutionary flower-power era when men grew their hair and danced in tie-dyed kaftans, but at least back then, we had useful discussions about the difference between sex and gender, between maleness and masculinity, between simplistic binaries where men are strong and emotionally limited, and women are, to use the lexicon of the lads at Yarra Valley, "unrapeable".

The breaking down of prejudices against non-binary people also opened up the possibilities for identity (possibilities still being resisted by boofheads, [as we saw this week in Cumberland Shine](#)).

The neoliberal backlash against this fluid new world, however, has been ruthless. It seems tautological to have to note that capitalism is patriarchal and patriarchy requires the oppositional binaries of masculinity/femininity.

Now, even when hair can be long and skirts occasionally appear on male models, many men – certainly those we are told are normal role models – are terrified of stepping outside the boundaries dictated by capitalist orthodoxy.

We know rape is a violent expression of power, so why did those boys choose to describe their adolescent, messy, unachievable desires with that word? While ranking girls is cruel, but reflects back on the boys' impotence (in your dreams, would be a reasonable response to their lists), to rank girls as "unrapeable" was their attempt to take back the power through the threat of violence. That's what needs to be addressed and it's urgent.

Even someone who has a well-developed sense of self, who is experienced in writing with care and precision about emotions, and who has a reputation for honesty and decency, even that kind of man has trouble confronting the violent power within masculine cultures.

[Martin Flanagan](#) is a journalist who made a brilliant career out of writing about the AFL in a way that earned him the nickname "Deepness" from [Kevin Sheedy](#). He also wrote a novel, [Going Away](#), which touched on the experience of Catholic boarding school, but that was coming at the danger from an angle – 'a jig, a reel, a series of stories spun in a certain spirit'.

It sounds like that was a practice match for writing about the thing that was still haunting him. And so he begins his memoir, [The Empty Honour Board](#), with the line, 'I was warned against writing this'. A novelist called his intention 'an act of insanity'. Someone else [warned him](#), 'You don't want to go stirring up that shit again'.

I think Flanagan wants to say "not all priests" and "not all boys" but is aware that's not really the point. Even one priest. One boy. And everyone else perhaps seeing it and doing nothing. That's the point.

I'm not sure why he was warned off writing the book, but it might have been that he was expecting to be attacked for his willingness to feel pity for the priests. He agrees with [Geoffrey Robertson](#), who [wrote about the Inquiry into institutional abuse](#), that most of the abusive priests are 'not even paedophiles, but rather sexually maladjusted, immature and lonely individuals'.

That infuriates those who have to pick up the pieces of children broken by such "maladjusted" men, but maybe understanding how the maladjustment happens and trying to prevent it will help protect children.

Flanagan compares what happens in the masculinist system of the Catholic boarding school to what [William Golding](#) described in his novel [Lord of the Flies](#), where boys isolated on an island lose their moral discipline and degenerate into thuggery: 'They are innocent in the sense that they have played no part in creating the situation they are trapped in', he writes of those boys, 'But it doesn't follow that their behaviour within that situation is innocent'.

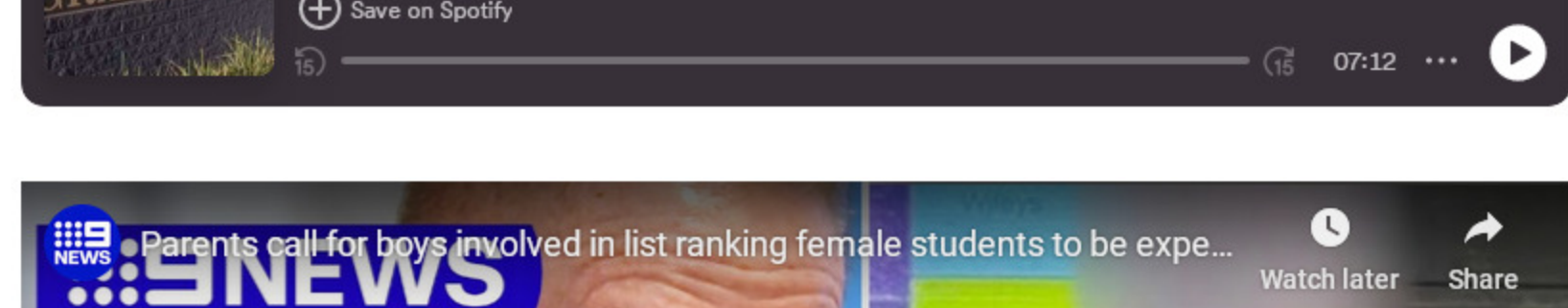
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I reckon there's more to be written about what Flanagan talks about in [The Empty Honour Board](#), but he's done his bit and deserves to be thanked for having the courage and skill to write about the masculinity codes that made it possible for wickedness to prosper. We now need other writers to step up and tackle a culture that convinces young men the way to deal with their swirling emotional desires is to imagine raping young women.

Some honest analysis of what masculinist ideology actually promotes is urgently required.

If you would like to speak to someone about sexual violence, please call the 1800 Respect hotline on 1800 737 732 or [chat online](#).

***This article is also available on audio here:**



[Rosemary Sorensen](#) was a newspaper, books and arts journalist based in Melbourne, then Brisbane, before moving to regional Victoria, where she founded the Bendigo Writers Festival, which she directed for 13 years.

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Rosemary · 14 days ago · Guest

why do you think ending misogyny is impossible? I know it's huge and embedded in cultures but what's the origin? I just can't come at the idea that it's innate in male human beings to hate female human beings. be curious about the differences, yes, but why fear? (good luck with that, eh?)

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FredUp · 15 days ago

I have no idea how parents can send the young kids to a boarding school and expect them to be well-adjusted. And why even have children if you not going to live with them and be part of the lives?

The worst thing you can deny a child is love.

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CMMO · 15 days ago

Apparently this was originally a boys school.....but they went co-ed in 1978. They seem to be still stuck in the traditions of bastardisation and wanton cruelty that private schools for boys are famous for. I suspect there would be a few teachers there who still prefer the old style.

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D · 15 days ago

oh well, here we go again. The rankings sound exactly like some I came across when I was a young woman, so what has changed? Just about nothing.

For all the millions spent on cultural change in such august places as the department of defence and parliament house amongst many others of lesser prestige, we have achieved so little, if not nothing. And the answer is very simple - you can't change the culture until you change the structure, that's the substrate the culture grows on. I know people don't want to believe it, I am sure people here are sick of me writing it. But the fact remains that it is the answer.

We were saying 50 years ago that if we didn't change the structure you would still be having this disrespect and DV problem with women murdered for ever and here we are, all of those years later and guess what, we are having even more women murdered and I am still saying it - and people are still ignoring it. Seems like women being expendable is less of a problem than actually making change.

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Alpo · 15 days ago

I think Flanagan wants to say "not all priests" and "not all boys", but is aware that's not really the point. Even one priest. One boy. And everyone else perhaps seeing it and doing nothing. That's the point.... Are we sure that life in girl schools in the same period was pure and angelical?

<https://www.theguardian.com...>

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Alpo · 15 days ago

"The neoliberal backlash against this fluid new world, however, has been ruthless. It seems tautological to have to note that capitalism is patriarchal and patriarchy requires the oppositional binaries of masculinity/femininity"... Please let distinguish between Neoliberalism and Capitalism. I bet that most non-binary people would love to have their own private property to live in, bought with the decent income they receive for their hard work. That would qualify them as Capitalist. Neoliberalism means to maximise your income even if that is detrimental to the common good. Neoliberalism is a degeneration of Capitalism.

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