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Book Review by Leonard Sax

LOVE BYTES

GIRLS®: Generation Z and the Commodification of Everything, by Freya India.
Henry Holt and Co., 384 pages, \$29.99 (cloth), \$20.99 (paper)



A RECENT SURVEY OF AMERICAN TEENS found that 42% of boys aged 13 to 17 are now using A.I.-powered apps to create their own pornography. Thirty-two percent have created “deepfake” porn of girls their own age, then shared those images with others. In my work as a family physician and researcher, I have talked with these boys. One told me it’s almost magical: he speaks his fantasy, and—poof!—20 seconds later, there it is: professional-grade pornography, spun up in an app such as Seedream or Nano Banana. And this boy is 15 years old. He has never kissed a girl. A growing number of boys describe themselves not as heterosexual but as “pornosexual.” In my experience, a significant minority of these young men are virgins. They *say* that they prefer porn to the real thing. But they have never experienced the real thing.

Unfortunately, the elderly—by which I mean people over 40 years of age—often have no idea what is going on. A 16-year-old boy was suspended at a school I visited for creating deepfake porn of a classmate, then sharing those images with other boys at the school. When the parents were told what their son had done, they could neither believe nor understand what had happened. They had no idea such a thing was possible. They didn’t

think their son was even *looking* at porn, much less producing and distributing it.

IN THE NEW EDITION OF MY BOOK *BOYS Adrift*, published this year, I explore how A.I.-generated seductresses are derailing many boys. But we now have a book which explores in depth how A.I.-powered apps are changing the lives of girls, too. Freya India, author of *GIRLS®: Generation Z and the Commodification of Everything*, was born in 1999. Her book is an extension of her popular Substack page of the same name. In both, she explores first-hand how digital technology has transformed the experience of young women. A native of England, she has recently relocated to Washington, D.C. She is careful to cite examples and data from both the United Kingdom and the United States, but she makes clear that there is little difference between our two countries on most of the topics she addresses. Her book shows that, whereas boys are prone to inventing and micro-editing their imagined partners, girls have tended to turn their tech inward to “perfect” *themselves*. The consequences are profound.

India writes that as a teenager, she “went from watching makeup tutorials on YouTube to watching Facetune tutorials”—a transition

from the real world to the virtual world. Facetune—like similar apps such as BeautyPlus, FaceApp, PrettyUp, and Perfect365—is an inexpensive A.I.-powered app that allows users to fix not only their faces, but any part of their bodies. Girls can virtually slim their waists, whiten their teeth, scrub away their acne. As of this writing, Facetune has had more than 295 million downloads. And India reminds us that Facetune can fix not only photos, but also videos. A girl can pause a video of herself, make some changes, and let Facetune seamlessly apply those changes across the entire video.

“Forget the painful process of accepting yourself, of coming to terms with your flaws, or even learning to love them,” writes India; in the digital dreamscape of her youth, “none of that was necessary anymore.” TikTok now has filters that “can lengthen legs, add curves, and slim waists on video.” According to a survey sponsored by Dove/Unilever, 80% of American girls have used apps like these by the age of 13. As India observes, the confidence gained by using such apps is fragile. You may get hundreds of likes for your Instagram post of your Facetuned selfie, “only to crash when you catch your reflection in the mirror.”

What does it mean to be a woman? Girls used to learn the answer from actual women. Scholars such as Robert Putnam have docu-

mented how the strong bonds Americans once shared across generations have weakened and dissolved. There are no sewing circles anymore. American girls today don't spend their free time with real adult women. Increasingly, they live online, where they are scrolling through YouTube videos of beauty influencers. This immersion in digital culture teaches them that being a woman means looking beautiful, period. India writes about how to her one beauty influencer "didn't feel like some distant celebrity; she felt like a friend." Many online personalities intentionally create such "parasocial" connections—a false sense of intimacy among strangers—by addressing their followers as "besties" and "family." But the end result is insecurity and anxiety. As India observes: "the more we try to look perfect on the outside, the more insecure we feel on the inside."

INDIA SHOWS HOW THE SAME A.I.-POWERED algorithms that steer girls toward beauty influencers also pull them down rabbit holes that encourage self-diagnosis and pathologizing. Girls who scroll through TikTok long enough will eventually encounter videos which offer a checklist to determine whether you have ADHD, or anxiety, or depression. Or maybe you're on the autism spectrum? The answer almost always seems to be yes, you've found your diagnosis; whereupon the same influencers recommend their favorite therapy apps or medications. In one recent survey, 72% of Gen Z girls said, "mental health challenges are an important part of my identity."

The end result is a growing proportion of girls who have retreated into their bedrooms, fearful of real-world interaction. "Across social media, there is a growing celebration of being indoors by ourselves," India observes. Forget about FOMO, the fear of missing out. For these girls, it's JOMO: the joy of missing out. "Bedrotting" is one of Gen Z's favorite trends. "Girls boast of spending all day lying in bed indoors. Videos tagged #bedrotting have more than 300 million views."

In the most troubling chapters of the book, India explores how the online world has corrupted sexuality for both boys and girls. She writes: "For us, dating was swiping through people like they were items in a catalog. The only way to be loved was to become a better object." India notes that almost every teen today has seen pornography, and the pornography itself has become much more violent. She cites a survey of 16- to 21-year-olds in which 47% of respondents stated that girls expect sex to involve physical aggression (with the man as the aggressor) and a further 42% believe that most girls enjoy these acts of sexual aggression. India describes a viral YouTube video posted by actress Demi Lovato in which

Lovato encouraged girls to "Be a slut. Show your body. Get naked. Make/watch porn. Make money." This is the same former Disney actress who, at age 16 in 2008, wanted us to know that she was wearing a purity ring. India cites Lovato not to mock her, but to show how she and the culture have changed in 20 years. The result is ironic: "The generation with infinite dating options, and unashamed about hooking up, is having the least sex, dating far less, and losing faith in love itself."

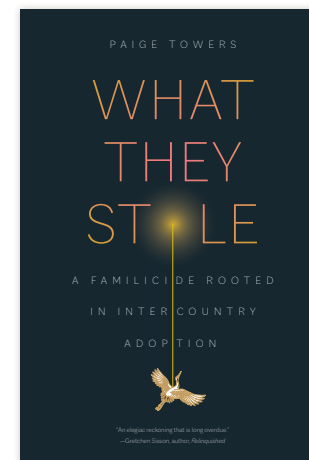
GIRLS® IS INVALUABLE AS A GUIDE TO the experience of teenage girls and young women right now. It is less useful if you are looking for solutions beyond just turning off the devices. In part, this is because India's lack of any religious or even moral framework makes it difficult for her to articulate a positive vision of what girls and women can be. She writes that "[r]eligion has more or less disappeared." This sweeping generalization tells us less about the state of religion writ large than about the place of religion in India's own life: "Growing up, I never thought much about religion or met many people who did." Yet she acknowledges that she and other young women are searching "for something, anything, to believe in."

Disappointingly, then, the final chapter of the book is a list of anodyne platitudes: "Aspire to be different." "Invest in other people. See your family as much as you can." If you're looking for concrete, evidence-based strategies to deploy in your home to protect your daughter, better choices would be Dr. Lisa Damour's book *Untangled* (2016) and Meg Meeker, M.D.'s book *Raising a Strong Daughter in a Toxic Culture* (2019). If you could use some help specifically in protecting your kid, girl or boy, from A.I.-powered apps, then you will want to read Dr. Jean Twenge's *Ten Rules for Raising Kids in a High-Tech World* (2025), which includes detailed instructions (in chapters 6 and 9) on how to deploy a parental monitoring app so that your daughter can't access Facetime and your son can't access Seedream or Nano Banana. These apps really work if you know how to install them properly, and Twenge walks through how to set them up step by step. But if you are looking instead for an update on what's happening in the lives of teen girls, from the perspective of a young woman who knows first-hand what she's talking about, *GIRLS®* is for you.

Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D., is a physician, psychologist, and the author of four books for parents, including the new edition of *Boys Adrift: The Six Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men* (Basic Books).

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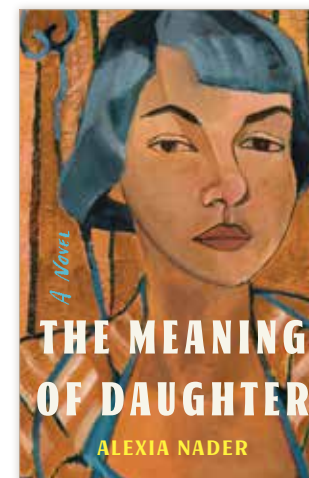
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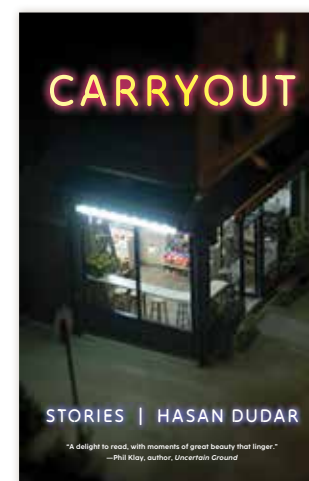
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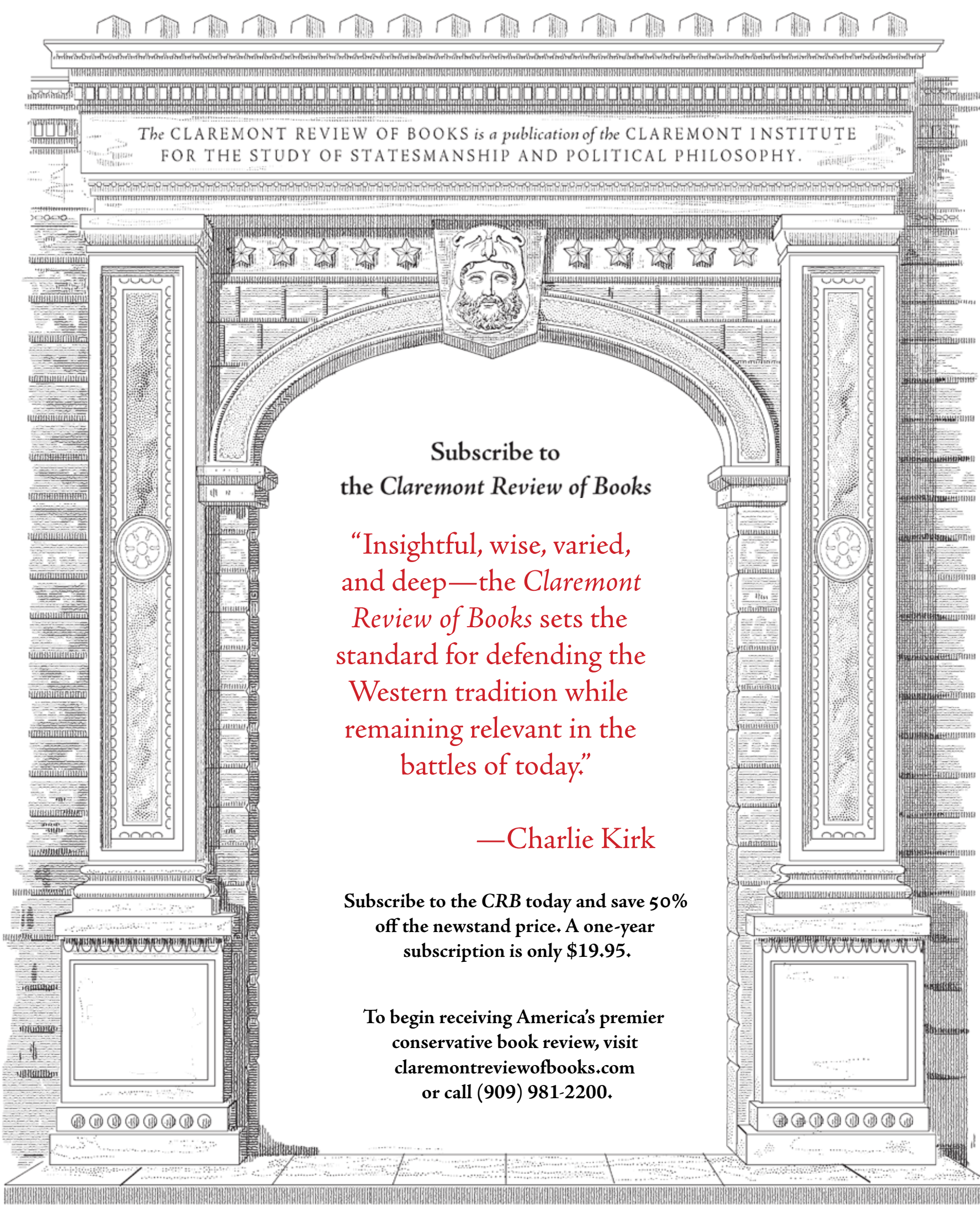


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