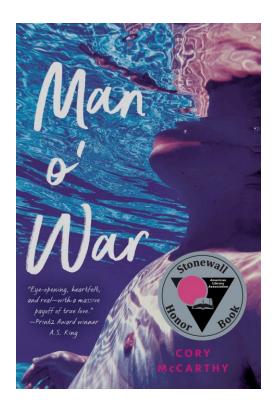


MAN O' WAR



Young Adult

Book Summary:

A young woman has a romantic relationship with a young man and comes to believe she is a different gender.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains obscene sexual activities; sexual nudity; alternate gender ideologies; alternate sexualities; profanity/derogatory terms; references to hate involving homophobia and racism; controversial social and historical commentary; and alcohol use.

By Cory McCarthy

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	"The men's reads men's, and the women's reads girls'? That's some patriarchal fuckery." While the girls'-room occupants always trickled to the pool, delayed by their changing styles, the boys dumped out as one. Did they dress like that too? In a pod of penises?
9	"Maybe it's because he's gay.""Maybe it's because everyone at school is a damn racist who yells at him to enroll in every sport just because he's Black and tall. He's under a lot of pressure."
13	"He's taking out Gia. They're going to see that horny vampire movie. Rated R. Multiple sex scenes."
17	"Butch isn't an insult, you know. Especially in the rainbow community." I somehow managed to point out that that wasn't applicable in this situation, and would she please stop lobbing rainbow crap at me. "I didn't think you'd slept with Joss," she added into my hostile silence.
21	"Them. Man o' wars aren't an 'it.' They're a whole colony of organisms living together. Symbiotic as a whole." She grinned ever so slightly. "A polygender."
22	"Total baby dyke." Gia paused. "I hear she got hot because she's a state-ranked gymnast. Wait, was that her?" She dropped her voice. "How the mighty have fallen. Jellyfish Haven duty. Poor, pretty lesbian."
24	One minute and forty-three seconds of staring at Indy's perfectly round head and natural pink lips and sound shoulders to realize that maybe I wasn't organically homophobic like everyone else.
34	"Also, if you want to know, my peers never apply for pearl diver because of those Hooters cleavage suits. We take bets on if you hire on breast circumference alone."
35	"No need for khaki. I applied for pearl diver. If they hire me, I'll be walking cleavage." Taylor put her phone down and smiled straight at me, which warmed even after a year of dating. She liked me. When she looked at me, she got turned on, and that turned me on.
36	"We could have fifty orgasms in that window. We should keep a tally."Taylor kissed me, soft and slow. I kept my eyes open, until I caught her checking and sealed them shut. I tried to make up for it in wandering hands, and she made the right sounds, so I was doing a good job.
39	"Indy left school because she is was a lesbian. So, Indy is a former lesbian?" "She's clearly bi or pan. Met a cute guy and expanded her repertoire. It happens to the best of us. Not me. I'm not losing my gold star for any penis."
40	The last flag was that Henrietta was going through menopause and couldn't help but tell me about every hot flash that overtook her petite physique—which was often when I talked about having sex with girls.
42	"How does someone become not a lesbian? Because they're bi or pan?""I attended a gender and sexuality seminar a few months ago. Those words mainly differ in that they describe how someone is attracted, not necessarily to whom. Bisexual people can experience different kinds of attraction to different genders. Pansexual people can experience a similar kind of attraction, no matter the gender identity."
43	"Gender and sexuality are fluid for some. They start in one place and transition when they're ready." "Shock to me too, but apparently I have two much-desired characteristics. Big lungs and bigger breasts."



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	"Or girls. Same rules apply. As well as the enbies and agenders and demi-everythings. No flirting."
	"Are you sure about being a lesbian? From what you've disclosed in our conversations you're more likely pansexual. And gender nonconforming."Taylor liked to rage about gender nonconforming people; I liked to avoid the entire subject.
	"The flag I wore to school in fourth was misleading. My mom is a lesbian. I was supporting her. I was ten. It was all mom-hero adoration. I had zero idea I was about to become a target for kid, parent, and administrator alike.""Isn't being nonbinary a joke."
58	Taylor's mouth connected with mine, and my head swam. I couldn't deny that kissing her was better than kissing anyone else I'd been with.
	She pressed her hands under my shirt, caressing upward "What's wrong now?" "I'm not going to take my shirt off." "Stop. She's not a girl." I stumbled to say it like Indy. "She they are nonbinary." "You're kidding. We're not doing the nonbinary fads. My mom said people tried to do that midway gender crap when she was a teen too. If you've got a vagina, you're a girl. Penis? Boy. If your vagina wants to dress up like a man—like you do all the time—you're not less of a woman. Women can be anything. Including manlike, but they're still women." "What about intersex people?" She gave me a questioning look. "Remember? We learned about them in sixth-grade biology. They're all around us. Millions of them." "They always have a dominant sex trait, and there are surgeries to help them fit in. Please, this world is full of enough bullshit. We don't need to go reinventing gender."
62	Damn it, maybe I was gender nonconforming or nonbinary or something else.
64	"It's not a rainbow flag," my brother said. "It's the asexual flag."
	She had been mother-henning the other two, who were both sophomores, and in my opinion too young to be working their cleavage for tips.
85	"Those're actually nice tits when they're all smashed on me."
	"I'm a predator!" he screamed. I let him go, and I wasn't prepared to feel sorry. He cowered, not a boy, but a creature of slime and white male privilege, unchecked for so long he might as well be Gollum.
87	"Body dysphoria. When your body makes you feel the opposite of euphoria." Indy nodded encouragingly, and I squinted. "It's like a painful disappearing inside your skin." Huh. "My therapist said it's depression from feeling ostracized as a lesb queer person."
88	"Just add it to the pile. I'm anxious and depressed, and apparently, I disappear inside my own skin like some kind of homophobic homo. Yeah, right. I'm afraid of myself."
	"Those are stereotypes, not laws. And they're way dated. Like nineties dated. You don't even need to be a woman to identify as a lesbian anymore, not that a person ever should have had to. Gods, I loathe identity policing.""There's this thing called the internet, and—" "And my mom guards my browser history like a dragon." Now Indy looked really sorry for me. "What's a binder?" I blurted. Indy reached in the back, rummaging through a clothes pile to pull out a thick elastic tube
	may reached in the back, running through a clothes pile to pull out a thick elastic tube



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	top fastened by industrial Velcro. "This is a binder. It flattens your chest." "That's for trans people. I'm not trans." "It's for humans. Trans people, sure, but also nonbinary folk of all sorts. I mean, a lot of cis people wear them too. Athletes. Actors. Literally any human who needs it." So I could get one and tell people it was about sports when they inevitably required an explanation about it. Well, shit. That could work. "Where do you get one?" "In Ohio? Only online. I got this in San Francisco. My grandparents live there. They have these amazing queer shops that"
90	I held the aching spot on my side where my rib felt like a stress fracture. "Can wearing too many sports bras hurt you too?" "How many do you wear?" As many as I need.
97	"She thinks you two are kindergarteners because you don't have sex, and that we're going to eat candy and wander around campus in costume like huge nerds." "We are going to do that," Karina said. "Just with a lot of booze," Everett added. C-3PO Harvey toasted with a flip flask that bore the symbol of the Rebel Alliance. "Did she make you promise not to drink? She always did that to me back in high school."
98	"This is everything I ever wanted! Halloween at OU with a pack of fanboys." "Try fanbies. More gender inclusive," Karina said.
100	With Catherine's assistance (and search engine), I'd looked up those terms Indy had spoken in their car, and the right words did that thing right words always do: create a sense of communion. Body dysphoria had to be where all my anxiety came from, my disconnect. And internalized homophobia pretty sure that was the well of my endless depression. And anger. Odd how naming the madness eased it.
101	Everett plopped on his Kylo helmet and did a few warm-ups, lightsaber nearly taking out a group of slutty drag nurses on the street corner.
104	Everett was drunk already.
110	The kind of desperate laughter that comes with the revving down of alcohol and dank edibles in your veins "Assuming lesbians are vegetarians is totally a microaggression." "But you're no lesbian. As previously established and then confirmed with that"—I exhaled loudly—" incredibly attractive androgynous model of a boyfriend you've got." "Partner. Ex-partner. He's a demiboy. And we are only good at sex and breaking up. But yeah, Chauncey is beautiful. And he's extremely aware of it at all times."
	"I'm coming for your gender binary!"My mom's views on things were racist, and yet my family let it happen. I felt as guilty for letting her dye my hair as for letting her believe that light hair and skin were coinage. That being a heterosexual, cisgendered person was normal, and that everything else was not. Then again, she lived in that world; she didn't create it"The word shouldn't be gendered at all. But then if we change it, if we adopt the word without the e, we're leaning into the patriarchy, painting with a masculine brush. And if we adopt the word with it, we risk feminizing being fair-haired.
114	"Because you're nonbinary." "Which you think is a joke."





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	"I don't think it's a joke. I never did. I said that because I'd just spent an entire year in a relationship with someone who insisted a gender spectrum was unnecessarily newfangled."
	"Sumeria, Babylon, Assyria. Those are some of the oldest human civilizations. The kalû, the gala, the assinnu. Those are different, documented nonbinary genders from those civilizations, literal thousands of years ago. Oh, not to forget the deity Ishtar, who was all about gender ambiguity and transformation. A whole-ass ancient god of not fitting into the system."
117	"There were years that I convinced myself you might actually like the boys you were hooking up with. I really hoped you did. If you didn't, that would be too sad."
119	"They, Catherine. Indy uses they/ them." "Actually, Indy uses she/ they most of the time. Right now her Instagram profile says she/ her. I'm looking at it right now"—a pause to gather emphasis—" how did you spend the weekend with someone without knowing their pronouns?"
127	No one saw us together until we were kissing outright in the hall. Mostly, we made a home on her bed and tangled in a way we couldn't have possibly enjoyed at school without taunts.
128	Gia got in my face, my line of sight straight up her camel toe. "There's someone here to try out for the dive team, and she cross-dressed. Coach is losing her damn mind."
129	Indy stood before Coach and Catherine, holding conference, and I invited myself straight into it. "What's going on?" "She can't try out in that," Kerrig said. I fired up. "They can—"
140	Let me drive you home from practice tomorrow. Indy wrote back right away. Sounds kinky. I'm in.
154	"There's a gender-neutral bathroom for you. Waits, head to the girls' room." "I'm not a girl. Let me go in the Did you say 'gender neutral'? How could a bathroom be gender neutral? Do you mean gender inclusive? Granted assigning genders to bathrooms makes about as much sense as throwing a party to celebrate the ultrasound photo of your poor kid's genitals."
155	I found the much smaller locker room in a daze; it was actually labeled gender neutral. When I stepped inside, I nearly backed straight out. There was a boy in there. A boy with long hair. Who must not have been a boy, and when would I stop assuming people's genders based on their body parts? "I'm not allowed to change with the girls because I'm attracted to one of them, who isn't even a girl, by the way, but here we are."
157	Maybe my dysphoria wasn't because of my gender-whatever. Indy's gender was a mystery, one they seemed to fully enjoy.
174	"Well, you know how queer circles aren't always accepting? A few years ago, right before you jumped in my shark tank, I went to a cosplay party with the Cleveland All Out group. 'Dress as your gender identity.' I came as Wednesday Addams because, in my mind, gender is dead. I wore all my pronouns pins, and no one would talk to me. All genders welcome yeah right. Until someone agender shows up."A lot of people don't know their gender beyond their assigned sex.





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175	"Nonbinary seems like a better starting point here. River, what about trans masc?" "Trans is too political." Indy's response was stiff, raised eyebrows. "I don't want to go anywhere near that word. It makes boomers' minds melt. And politicians go all Thanos, and I don't want to."
176	"But that's just it. I don't want to pick a new word. Sending myself the wrong way down the lesbian highway messed me up. Gender should be more like tides. And I'm a man o' war." Indy grinned. "You do remind me of a brilliantly multicolored colony of polyps. And like the man o' war, do you use they/ them pronouns?" "Interestingly enough, I don't mind being a man o' war. It might be the best gender identity out there. What eats me is that I was ever lumped in with those jellyfish to begin with."
178	Her binder disappeared, and she wore nothing under soft button-downs, which drove me absolutely insane. We nearly kissed all the time, cheek to cheek, nose to nose. Anything to get closer. To stake small claims on each other everywhere we went. I spent a lot of time in the shower one knuckle in my mouth, the other hand extra busy. We listened to music, collapsed after swim practice in a heap of sore muscles, our bodies pressed together lengthwise on the couch in her room.
180	She kissed my neck at the corner of my jaw, and I shivered in rather delicious agony.
188	My thumb tugged one lip of her smile. She kissed my fingers, and I kissed Indy. We were soft but certain. My body heated, hummed. I held back, lips parting from hers soon but not fast. I opened my mouth to comment, and she shook her head, pressing me down onto her bed, her knees straddling my lap. She kissed me this time, and it was long and hard, and soul-deep. Euphoria. And that's why dysphoria was so aptly named. They were similar experiences, both a flight to a different realm of being, one to endless light, the other? Absolute nothingness. Indigo
	Waits made me feel euphoric. Like catching the wind, sailing. Our kissing lapsed into a kind of madness, and I tried to reel it back in before we turned irrevocably naked. "Should we stop?" I asked, eyes searching for hers until I found them and looked away. "Do you want to stop, or do you think we should because yielding is deemed socially respectful decorum?" I blinked hard, unable to see past the hormones that left me extra aware of my hands and Indy's extraordinary ass. "The second one."
	Indy was still straddling my lap, and I held the tops of her hips, thoughts whirlpooling. "I can wait, but if you're waiting for me, I'm ready." "Right now?" I'd worked myself up to kiss Indy. Now she was asking for a lot more. I could do this; I certainly wanted to. I squeezed her legs, fingers edging toward the feverish center of her body. Indy threw her head back and groaned, and I was nearly undone. I looped off her baggy pajama top, revealing those sound shoulders, hard nipples, and the excruciatingly soft skin of her chest. Her kisses moved to my neck, and I lost my shirt, my binder pulled as tightly as possible, limiting each breath. Nuzzling the nook between her shoulder and neck, I asked, "Chest? Yes or no?" "Yes, please."



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	My hands brushed every inch of her, palms open on her nipples that were so sensitive her sounds grew wild and her knees clamped on my hips. We switched positions, and I sank between her legs. Indy tossed herself backward on the bed, and I tugged away her unders, kissed her wide-open until her body rippled and arched, and she nearly pulled my hair out. She came just like she changed her clothes: unabashed and unbound. Intimidating and proud.
	Afterward, she reached for me with the same kind of hunger that had driven me here in the first place, only I was having trouble breathing. Relaxing. Feeling. Her hands went after my belt, and I couldn't help begging my dysphoria, Not now. Please don't do this to me right now.
	My three-pound binder was holding in a million pounds of flesh. I tackled her, flipping us with my weight, lifting my hips to kick off my pants. My skin loved the warm angles of her body. Indy's neck and arms, her shaking legs. We pressed into each other at the same moment, and when I found her eyes wide, searching out mine, I didn't know what was wrong. I nearly asked, nearly stopped us. But there was nothing wrong with Indy staring into me while touching me so tenderly I wanted to cry. Intrusive thoughts rose from my depths. Joss calling my orgasms too masculine. Taylor scolding me to come like a woman, to surrender to it or some shit. I'd long since pretended to finish before I had.
	We kissed madly, came so many times. Our bodies shook into pieces, each one was more satisfying than smashing dinnerware on cement. We stayed in that bed for days, literal years following the countdown of midnight.
	I'd always been jealous of that. I'd always been jealous of a lot of things about Joss. He had the perfect swimmer's V body, his brown skin notable in this sea of white. I'd never asked him how he navigated the difference. As a basically-white-person, I hadn't felt like I had the right, so I'd just ignored his race. Like everyone else. That must have felt pretty terrible.
195	"Since we're being so open, help me win an argument with Anders. Consider the baseball diamond of hooking up. Is third base considered sex for people like you? If so, what is a home run?"
	"You want me to explain the difference between fingering and sex?""So, it comes down to nuance. This was my understanding. Not to mention there are lots of sex-based options that are sex no matter what combination of pieces."
	"Queers don't have bases." Indy waved their hand. "And it isn't because of anatomy. I've had plenty of what is traditionally considered sex that hardly felt like sex."
197	Indy sat behind me on the dark, cold bus. Their hands moved under my hoodie in the back, massaging. I wasn't wearing my binder, having been too tired to strap it on, and I could feel their fingers on skin that was usually kept away from everyone, even Indy, even in our more riotous explorations of each other. They lowered their face to my shoulder and kissed the back of my neck.
-	Indy kissed me. Their lips were a grounding rod, their body made everything all right.
-	"Can I be the bisexual skank?" Indy held up a hand.
217	Indy kissed my jaw, pulled my face toward their face. I kissed them back with a sudden drowning need, until several people started hooting and banging outside the door "They think we're making up," I explained. "Makeup sex."



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	I erased the name while Hit It watched me, perched on her desk chair like a raven. I wrote, River, they/ them.
	"This place is overrun with gross cis white dudes." She changed on her side of the room. Electra had an entire array of sequined tops for working out. "I knew this place was Wonder Bread, but the homogeny is downright debilitating. Most of my friends are Black back home. They said, 'Don't go there! You'll get brainwashed by privilege.'"
	"Yeah, but is that weird? Because you are kind of white." She paused as if maybe she'd said something wrong. I shrugged; she was right. "But if you ask any of the tools here, they'd yell, 'Arab is not white.' And then scream terrorist and run around like brain-dead morons." "We're only white when people need us to be. It's more confusing than weird."
237	I put my goggles on, nodded, and we took over the water like a pod of penises.
241	"I get the biggest crushes on effeminate bisexual man."
	"Cultural homophobia and all." But it was more than that, wasn't it? "Transphobia. Cissexism."
248	"I have a friend who helped me figure out I have body dysphoria, mostly about my chest. I need a doctor or something. I need to change it, but I also don't want to talk about it. At all." "You have come to the right place." He pulled out a one-inch three-ring binder and handed it over. "That's a list of trans-friendly doctors, gynecologists, dentists, you name it. There's information in there about testosterone and gender-affirming surgery. Do me a favor and don't search for things online unless you have to. The internet is where transphobes go to spread hateful information. Yes, you can get your transition covered by insurance. No, it's not impossible. None of it is impossible. Some people only want you to think it is." I opened the binder randomly to a page on top surgery. The heading read, Female to Male/Nonbinary (FTMX). There were pictures with the faces artfully covered. Breasts turned into chests. Impossible translated to possible as easily as before-and-after photos. I'd never let myself think of a future without binders and endless chest pain. That wasn't the kind of wild hope I could let myself have; I'd even resented Indy for bringing it up only half a year ago. But now, the possibility left me a new kind of breathless.q "Like a neon glow stick. With the kind of blond hair and blue eyes that continue to haunt humanity with racist beauty ideals." "I'm a trans person Kirk It's called my doed name."
	"I'm a trans person, Kirk. It's called my dead name."He glanced over the open page on trans menstruation options, and I stole the binder and closed it. "Talk."
	"And a few other oceans. There was some trash-fire law passed in some horrid middle state last week that protects bigots who shun trans people from retail establishments and restaurants. No biggie, America isn't Germany in the 1930s or anything. People got rightly furious on the internet, and then they were gift wrapped and delivered that trans James Dean picture of you. Rebel in a lane."
	I watched them kiss from the length of the soccer field, and I found a pretty decent star and wished them well.
	Further back, a few months, there were pictures of our bodies twined up without any identifying marks. Only I knew it was us.



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270	The next person rang out, "How do you know you're queer if you've never had sex?""You don't seem queer."
	I drank. "My [insert random relative] is gay too." I drank.
	"I can't learn new pronouns. I'm too old." I drank.
	"But you can get married now, so stop complaining." I drank.
	"I met you by this name, so changing it is going to be really hard for me." I drank.
	"Queer is a bad word to my generation." I drank to the bottom of my cup on that one.
	By the time we'd gotten to "Just don't tell Grandma," I was truly thankful that I wasn't drinking alcohol because I would have been absolutely tanked.
278	"Yes, but there's only so many spots for this type of surgery at the medical center, and it's just been so popular lately. It's like your whole generation came out of the pandemic with different genders."
	I put on my best smile, which was useless behind the mask. "I can assure you that none of us are signing up for the pain and expense of major surgery because it's the cool thing to do." My voice purred these days. God bless testosterone.
279	"The psychiatrist wrote it," I reassured her. "He just wants proof that I saw a counselor for gender issues in high school, which I did. I'm just having a hard time tracking that person down."
280	Not to mention I had a splendid hookup situation with Israel, a raging retro crush on Indigo Waits, and now drum roll, please? A date for top surgery.
281	Dr. Jackson finally seemed satisfied. "For me, the hard part takes two hours. The hard part for you is two months. Two months is a long time to stay anywhere that's not home." Jeez, Louise, not everyone is privileged enough to have a home.
284	I tried not to punish him with my sudden, blinding dysphoria.
	And then all the sudden, I was seeing Indy and me kissing fiercely in our prom outfits—the very last time we were together without California between us.
	Accept others for being gender abusive and pro-captivity? Accept a culture that ruins animals and people alike in the name of capitalism?
301	By the light of a few thousand indoor stars, I kissed Indy. Her lips were soft, but firmer than I remembered. The other mouths I'd known over the last two years washed away, leaving only two: the Indy I knew and this new person. At first, we kissed as we always had, sweet with raw attentiveness. An earnestness of
205	clasping hands and wanting sounds.
302	Indy laughed with a deep purr, hands tracing the lines of my harness beneath my jeans, their thigh pressing into my manhood. "And is this also, 'thank you, Israel'?" "Nah." My voice cracked cutely. "That's all me. Though he did show me how to use it." Indy made a starving sound, their hands finding all the new pieces of me with new energy.
	When we started kissing again, all the teenage kinks had been worked out. We made love



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	all ways, and no offense to the boy I used to be, but if intention is the true difference, we intended at an entirely new level. Indy was loud and verbal, and said that they loved me, loved me, loved me while we were shaking together, our bodies whole.
303	I sat up and placed kisses on her stomach.
	Indy held me by the shoulders, gaze on my chest. "I need to see you shirtless." "Right now?" I asked. Indy guided me from behind, toward the front door. "I'm already going to have to run to make my flight. Inside. Strip."
310	I kissed them, more seriously than I'd been able to all week. There were tears on our lips, wetting the kiss, and then they left, and I dove into the last lap of my life without Indigo Waits.
	It's okay if you do not understand the difference between gender, assigned sex, and sexual orientation. Blurring these lines has been the prized weapon of sexism, cissexism, and homophobia for centuries. The patriarchy and capitalism need you to tell other people who they are so don't. Gen Z often embraces this PANTS metaphor: Assigned sex is about what's in your pants. Categories include female, intersex spectrum, male. Gender is how you feel about what's in your pants. Categories include transgender, nonbinary spectrum, cisgender, agender, two-spirit, man o' war, etc. Sexual orientation is about who you want in your pants and/ or how often. Categories include homo, pan, demi, bi, and hetero sexualities, as well as hyper, ace spectrum, and allo sexualities.

Profanity/Derogatory Term	Count
Ass	24
Bitch	1
Dick	10
Dyke	4
Fuck	31
Goddamn	1
Piss	4
Shit	33
Tit	1