

To Own a Dragon
REFLECTIONS ON GROWING UP **WITHOUT A FATHER**

DONALD MILLER
& JOHN MACMURRAY



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Good dads are almost as rare as fire-breathing dragons--or at least it seems. New from Donald Miller, author of the critically acclaimed *Blue Like Jazz*, comes a gut-wrenching honest look at growing up without a father. In his uniquely compelling style, Miller (and John MacMurray--the man who taught Donald many of the lessons his dad never did) reflects on what it is a father might have told him about identity, women, money, spirituality, fatherhood and more. Through Millers personal narrative and MacMurrays wisdom, children of absent fathers will discover how to pick up the broken pieces of a fatherless childhood...and put them back together.

To Own a Dragon: Reflections on Growing Up Without a Father Details

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Donald Miller**

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Amberlee Bixler says

To Own A Dragon is soon to be re-released under a different title, relative more deftly to the elephant's referenced in the writings.

I have to admit, I am a fatherless child as well, but I did not respond to this book at all the way I thought I would. Mr. Miller's prose, although hauntingly beautiful and powerful in its simplicity, told the story of a boy thrust into adulthood unprepared and ill-equipped due to the lack of a father in his life. It seemed, given our similar childhood experiences, I would have some deep, intrinsic understanding of Mr. Miller's perspectives and situation. I didn't, and, honestly, I still don't.

That said, I adore this book. It is one of my absolute favorites (if not just my absolute favorite) for its direct honesty and complete lack of pretense. The stories flow into each other as if Mr. Miller grabbed a cup of coffee (or a beer) with a friend, and just opened up his personal history books to share with the world. It's relevant, honest, tragic at times, and shows why Mr. Miller is this generation's Hemingway (sans the inbred cats and alcohol-laced bitterness).

Jeanette says

"...I clapped, and I meant it. It felt good to take a stand for somebody who nobody else was taking a stand for." (24)

"All my life I have been fascinated by stuff that isn't there." (29)

"I am not going to tell you it was easy. There were times I would have rather lived on my own, played my music as loud as I wanted, come home drunk, whatever. But playing your music as loud as you want and coming home drunk aren't real life. Real life, it turns out, is diapers and lawnmowers, decks that need painting, a wife that needs to be listened to, kids that need to be taught right from wrong, a checkbook, an oil change, a sunset behind a mountain, laughter at a kitchen table, too much wine, a chipped tooth, and a screaming child. The lessons I learned in the four years I spent with John and Terri will stay with me forever." (43)

"Dwight Eisenhower said his mother and father made an assumption that set the course of his life - *that the world could be fixed of its problems if every child understood the necessity of their existence*. Eisenhower's parents assumed if their children weren't alive, their family couldn't function." (47)

"'He did it, but He did it for us.' [the world]

'Us?' I questioned. 'You mean you and me?'

'Us,' John stated. 'He did it for His children. That is what beauty is for. All this beauty exists so you and I can see His glory, His artwork. It's like an invitation to worship Him, to know Him.'

'You think?' I said, softly, after a half-reflective pause.

'Absolutely, Don. Beauty doesn't make any sense apart from God giving a gift to His children. Think about it. Is there a Darwinian explanation for beauty? Not really. It's a love letter, that's all. It's this massive letter

to creation inviting us to enjoy Him.'" (57)

"I wondered if sliding our arms around a woman's hips wasn't a kind of infantile introduction to the metaphysical. If I allow myself, I can see God holding up flashcards as I fall in love with a woman, cards that say, *this is love, I am like this love, only better.*" (67)

"God is fathering me. God is fathering us. I know that if God loves me and wants me to succeed as much as John loves his kids and wants them to succeed, then life cannot be hopeless." (81)

"Sometimes I think the reason we don't like certain people is because we feel insecure around them . . . we are drawn to those who validate us and affirm us, and we resist those who don't." (86)

"In the end, women are really attracted to guys who have their crap together." (111)

"There are certain girls who are attracted to the criminal type, but I have never been attracted to those girls, so it wouldn't help me." (113)

"Fine then. You have made a good decision. This is the first rule of chess. Make good decisions. The only possible way you can lose in chess, and for that matter in life itself, is to make bad decisions. If you do not make bad decisions, you will not lose in chess, or in life. And the more good decisions you make the better your life will be. It is as easy as that. Who else would like to learn to play chess?" [Salome Thomas-El] . . . These are not the sons of doctors and lawyers, they are kids without fathers. But they learned what their fathers should have taught them. They've learned to make good decisions." (117)

"I don't know how many months, how many years I spent sitting and watching television, complaining to myself about how boring life was." (120) // my favorite realization was that i could watch life, living vicariously through characters, or i could *be* life.

"'I don't know,' Tony said. 'It's just that with my wife with Aimee, I've come to the conclusion I don't deserve her. I really don't. And the fact she would want to spend the rest of her life with me strikes me as incredible. I'm grateful, is all I am saying.' . . . 'Just saying that I think we can use other people, romantic stuff, to validate ourselves. It has nothing to do with love. And when you find love, or when you are mature enough to understand it, the feeling you get is gratitude. I'm not saying I am mature by any means,' Tony continued, 'but when I wake up in the morning and look at my wife sleeping next to me, I am sometimes overcome that another human being would want to share her life with me.'" (134)

"'Yeah, I think it's wrong,' I started in. 'But let's not turn the idea of right and wrong into coloring book material. This is a very complex subject. Sin, if we want to call it sin, is stuff that we do that God doesn't like, and the reason He doesn't like it is because He loves us, He is fathering us, and when we sin, we weaken ourselves, we confuse ourselves, we practice immaturity. He doesn't like that, not because He wants to feel powerful or right, but because He wants what is best for us. That's the first thing we have to remember about all of this.'" (138)

"'We watched what happened when the value of currency declined rapidly. It's not a good thing. Sex is like that. God is concerned with the value of sex staying high. It's important to a person's health, a family's health, and a society's health. But like anything, sex can be cheapened in our minds, so we don't hold it in high esteem. God doesn't think this is a good thing. Stuff God doesn't think is good is called sin.'

'What happens when sex is cheapened?' somebody asked.

'A lot happens. The main thing is there is no sacred physical territory associated with commitment. There can

still be emotional territory, but there isn't anything physical, experiential, that a man and a woman have only with each other. Sleeping around does something to the heart, to the mind. It leaves less commodity to spend on a sacred mate . . . So when sex gets cheapened, we are getting what we want without having to pay for it." (139) // in *Starship Troopers* Heinlein says value of a thing involves two perspectives: what *use* said thing is to him and what the thing *costs* him to get it.

"In the end, [of Dr. Alfred Kinsey's research into Sex, Gender, and Reproduction in the late 50s early 60s] Kinsey realized sex cannot be removed from love, that the strictly physical cannot be understood in isolation from the poetic or romantic, that, in fact, animal behavior must be tempered by morality stemming from something spiritual." (145)

"All work is good work. . . . I dug septic systems. I literally dug out people's crap and sucked it up into a tanker truck. And that is honorable. . . . the work was honorable. It made me a better person. Nobody should be ashamed of the work they do. They should do it with pride and do it right." [John MacMurray] (163)

"Work is worship." (165)

"Some people find beauty in music, some in painting, and some in landscape, but I find it in words. By beauty, I mean the feeling you have glimpsed another world, or looked into a portal that reveals a kind of magic or romance out of which the world has been constructed, a feeling there is something more than the mundane, and a reason for our plodding. The portal is different for everyone. Many of my friends find it by studying physics or math, some from biology or music, but for me it has become literature." (176)

"I felt in reading her [Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*] we do not read books to learn, we do not learn to succeed, we learn because in doing so we experience something like the pleasure God felt in the act of creation. We discover His handiworks *with* Him." (179)

Tom Bazan says

What can I say? It is a Donald Miller book. If you like his books, you'll like this. If you don't, then you probably won't. He has a natural way of showing his life--complete with struggles, victories, embarrassing experiences. I've seen Miller lumped in with some emergent thinkers; I've talked with many who would prefer to keep him out of that group. Part of this reason is likely because when you get to the end of his books you don't really know where he stands on some things--some important things. But, this seems to be a book from his heart. He grew up without a father in his house; I didn't. This book would probably speak to a different person differently. But, the point that God is our father--regardless of whether we grew up with a dad or not--is an important one to make. While there are things I could quibble about, I'm not going to, because he makes some good points. And, if nothing else, I enjoy reading his books; they make me laugh. And think.

Eric Dunn says

This is the third book I have read by Donald Miller. The other two are *Blue like Jazz* and *Searching for God Knows What*. I am a big fan of the way Miller writes. His books make me laugh and they also make me contemplate. He has a way of writing that makes it feel like you are having a conversation with him.

This book is about growing up without a father and the affect that can have on your life. My father was an active part of my life, but in my line of work with youth at our church I run into kids who don't have an active father figure. So, I thought this book would have some valuable insights for me on a professional level.

I was right about the valuable insights. There are a few statistics that are of interest but the best part about this book is hearing Miller talk about his thoughts on not having a dad around growing up. It's a good perspective to hear since I don't have a frame of reference for that kind of thing. This book also talks about the struggles Miller had with accepting God as a father figure. I had never thought about that aspect of things before. I can see now how you would struggle with the notion of God as a father figure if you didn't have a good benchmark of a father in your own life. Throughout the book Miller talks about little things along the way in life that brought him a little closer to the idea of God as a father. It is a very thought provoking book.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone that works with kids or has had trouble with father figures in their life. It is a great read and well worth the time spent.

Overall Rating: 5/5

Stephanie says

For some reason this book isn't considered one of Donald Miller's "greatest hits" but I consider this book one of my all time favorites. If you know anyone who grew up without their father, hand this to them. Miller gears this book toward males, but it was very relevant for me as a female. It is sad, but I've suspected for a long time this book didn't do so well because of the cover - it is really ugly.

Amy says

I'm not a man, nor did I grow up without a father, but this book spoke to broken places and reminded me what God's fathering of me can look like.

Missy Dollahon says

Donald Miller says that this book is really just for men who were raised without fathers - in this he is wrong. Because it is also, apparently, for women who were raised by such men, men who repeat the same patterns their fathers taught them, even if they physically remain in the home. I fall into the latter, and so much of my heart was articulated on the pages of this book. I understand more of what it is like to be a fatherless boy and I understand more of myself.

(And the I intend to re-read the conversation that he has with Texas frat boys about sex over and over so that I can magically morph into Don when my kids ask All The Questions.)

Renee Reynolds says

I think the author would agree, this book hardly represents his best writing. It does, however, offer his most helpful book to a critically important audience—fatherless boys and men. Its raw honesty and vulnerability, not to mention its readability, deserves 4 stars! For men and boys who've grown up without the grounding force of a good father this book will minister compassion, wisdom, truth, and help. In fact, even for my two teenage boys, who've enjoyed the immense privilege of a great father, a few key chapters will communicate, far better than their middle-aged parents, how to navigate with godly insight the complex issues they face today. I'm grateful that Donald Miller has studied his deep fatherless wounds and written a book to help today's boys and men, even those who aren't fatherless.

Lyndsey says

This might be a five star. I found this book to be thoughtfully written and thought-provoking. I grew up having a great relationship with my father. Miller, however, grew up with a mostly absent father. This book contains his reflections on the place of fatherhood in society and how the absence of fathers affect us. (Eighty-five percent of prison inmates grew up in a fatherless home.)

I like his observations about family. He talks a lot about how parents instill purpose into the lives of their children. Miller has a great quote from Eisenhower about how his dad always taught him that world needed him to be a good person. He contrasts this with his own childhood where he felt like a burden to his single-parent family (though he praises, not criticizes his mother). His discussion of this difference between feeling needed and feeling like a burden is something I'm still thinking about.

Though this book seems to be mostly directed to those who have been abandoned or ignored by their fathers, I found a lot in this to ponder. I recommend this to most any adult, especially anyone with kids or anyone who intends to have them someday.

Paige Gordon says

Although I grew up with a wonderful father and can't relate to Don in that particular way, I think the struggle to figure out what a real man is and if you qualify is something that all males deal with at one point or another. Don's insights from his own journey down that road are profound, funny, and well worth taking some time to meditate on. This book is a great, quick read for any man looking to more fully understand his role in this world and who isn't afraid of the gut-level honest conversation that most males tend to shy away from. A really good read!

Favorite Quote: "What I am saying is there had to come a point when I started taking responsibility for my life. I had to start opening envelopes, even if I didn't feel like it. I had to, because if I didn't I knew I would become one of these guys whose car is filled with newspapers and fast-food wrappers and stuffed animals in the back window. It's not just opening mail that I had to deal with. I had to show up for work on time. I had to pay taxes. I had to get car insurance. It's hard to believe I spent ten years of my life in an irresponsible fog, just kind of feeling that if I ignored the demands they would go away, or I could please ignorance. But the

hard truth is the demands don't change, they just get bigger, more adult, and the consequences of neglect get worse until pretty soon everything comes crashing down... In the end, women are attracted to guys who have their crap together."

Justin says

This was an excellent and simple read. There were many times that I, very loudly, laughed out loud at some of the stuff Miller wrote about. Some of the hilarity had to do how I could relate with a lot of his life experience even while having a different story. I think that this really helped awaken areas that are still healing in me and pressed them onto greater healing.

Chip Hill says

As always, Don knocks it out of the park. Terrific insight on a difficult subject. I was hooked from the prologue. I think you will be, too.

Cori says

This book was not really written for me. A) I am a woman and B) I have a great dad. This book was written primarily to the staggering number of fatherless boys and men out there, who struggle with their identities and figuring out how they fit into the world. Something like 90 percent of men in prison come from fatherless families, and knowing this (and being a fatherless son who could have easily ended up in prison) Miller lays out some life lessons for those who find themselves without a dad to guide them.

Yet even though this wasn't written for me, I loved it. The way Miller sees the world is so fresh and organic and realistic. It doesn't feel like there is much to him that was shaped by an editor — it's just raw conversations about a difficult subject. This is not a light-hearted book. He owns up to mistakes and his own insecurities and some of the stories will break your heart. He doesn't have all the answers. But he does offer up a number of helpful things that young men can do to recognize that although they do not have fathers to guide them, they can still be men and get along in this world. He also covers God as Your True Father, but does so without seeming trite or rehashing ideas that so many other books with similar content cover.

I want to give this book to pretty much everyone who has lost a parent, whether through neglect, death, or other reasons. I think it has the power to change the way these people see themselves and their circumstances.

And then there was this random bit, which I loved:

I wondered if all the relationships we have — relationships with our lover, our mother, our friends — are not unlike blurred photos of our relationship with God, as though they are foreshadowings in the sappy prologue of an eternal novel.

I wondered if sliding our arms around a woman's hips wasn't a kind of infantile introduction to the metaphysical. If I allow myself, I can see God holding up flashcards as I fall in love with a woman, cards

that say, “this is love, I am like this love, only better.”

“See?” God says, pointing at the flashcard with the word “love,” then pointing at His own chest while I move down the woman’s lips to her chin and her neck. “See?” God says, putting down the flashcard with “love” and picking up the word “oneness.” He says, “Get it? Do you see? It’s all living metaphors. It’s a hint of oneness — like My Trinity.”

Read my full review here: [http://letseatgrandpa.com/2010/08/30/...](http://letseatgrandpa.com/2010/08/30/)

Colleen Thomas says

Very helpful to understand my brothers a bit better. Donald uses a beautiful elephant metaphor and how we need to be taught to make good decisions. I’ve recently been adopting a mindset that there are no such thing as good and bad people only good and bad decisions and this book affirmed that.

It would’ve been a higher righting until the end of the book where he makes an off-handed comment about people with diverse abilities that seemed like it was supposed to be a joke.

Overall: easy read with some good points

Bryon says

I just finished reading Don Miller's To Own a Dragon. It was a great read, although, someone will have to explain the title to me.

Reading Don Miller is a lot of fun. He makes you think. Blue Like Jazz was the book that put Miller on the map. My favorite book of Don's is Searching for God Knows What. Don knocked it out of the park with that one. I couldn't hang in there long enough to enjoy Through Painted Deserts, but my wife liked it.

To Own a Dragon was good, though. Miller really does have a writing style that is engaging and keeps the reader turning pages. I had a difficult time with one chapter: MANHOOD: The Right Equipment. In this chapter, Miller takes pot shots at all that we real men hold dear like NASCAR, football, trucks, eating wild game, and Promise Keepers rallies. And he didn't seem to care for Wild at Heart, by John Eldredge, either. But the most disturbing thing in that chapter is he said that "God's definition of a real man is a person with a penis!" All you need to be a man is to own a penis - hey, maybe that's what the title means.

Apart from that, I loved the book. The book is mostly about the mentors Don had in his life. He dedicates the book to men who are mentoring younger men and I love that. Don tells about elephants in one chapter; that part of the growth cycle in a male elephant's life is to be mentored by an older, experienced male elephant role model. Older elephants teach younger elephants how life works. If, for some reason, this very natural cycle is interrupted, elephants grow up violent and dis-oriented in their world. Miller then explains that 85% of men in prison grow up without a father.

This book is full of wisdom and great information for guys who have a heart to disciple young men and teach

what it means to be a man that follows Christ. Definitely pick it up.

Tyler Durden, played by Brad Pitt in the movie Fight Club, ranted about being part of generation abandoned by fathers and raised by women. Miller's book would have quenched Tyler's rage. But that would have ruined a really manly ending to the movie.

<http://mondokblog.blogspot.com/2006/0...>

Tim says

Very readable. I can relate even though I didn't grow up fatherless. There are also lesson and mistakes to avoid for my own sons.

Sundi says

Speechless. Though this book was geared towards men, any woman that grew up with an absent father can benefit. Don provides wisdom, humor, and a beautiful picture of the amazing God we serve. I can never get enough of Donald Miller's words.

Becky Giovagnoni says

I love everything Donald Miller writes - this one because it helps me understand my husband better. So grateful he shared his own journey and pain so others (like me) could connect with it.

Rohan Kallicharan says

Donald Miller is easy to read and very engaging with his reader. He is able to approach potentially difficult subjects in an uncomplicated manner, which is the secret to his success.

This book will help those who have grown up without the presence of a father, whether through death, abandonment or any other circumstance. It also affirms the role of a mother - particularly the single one.

It is a very enjoyable yet uplifting read.

J. Alfred says

Somebody gave me this book back when it was called To Own a Dragon (the superior title). I read it at a pivotal time in my life, and reading it brought to my attention a lot of the issues that growing up without a

father around can cause, and which we typically try to downplay or ignore until somebody brings them out in the open in a disarming way, like Miller does. It helped me think through my taste in girls, my difficulty in submitting to authority, my feelings about a number of different things that it was good to see in print.

I can pretty confidently say that without this book my life would have turned out pretty differently, up to and including not being married to the excellent woman who is consistently making me a better person.

If you grew up without a dad in the picture, or if you work with kids in that situation, I recommend this book.
