

CONFESSIONS
OF A RECOVERING
PETER PAN

A CAUTIONARY MEMOIR

TODD COLEMAN

**HOW BABY BOOMERS CREATED
THE PETER PAN SYNDROME
AND WHY YOU NEVER
HAVE TO GROW UP**

RHEO PRESS

THREE

The Pan Generation

GROWING PAINS

Growing up, like breaking up, is hard to do.

But is it really necessary? Is “maturity” all that important? Could it be optional?

Such questions would have been inconceivable a few decades ago. But then something terrible and/or wonderful happened, depending on your point of view—something tragically disruptive or magically transformational.

Baby Boomers happened—that ubiquitous, iconoclastic post-war generation that dominated world culture for 50 years. The original “Me Generation” (there have been many since) invented the Peter Pan Syndrome—the refusal of grown-ups to grow up—and made it socially acceptable to remain an adolescent forever.

Peter Pan’s shadow has only lengthened over time, infecting every generation, gender, and culture. Even the most responsible of men—with good jobs, families, and mortgages—have a private Neverland to escape to, a high-tech man-cave flickering with high-def shadows and multi-player Lost Boy pals.

Many women today identify as Pans—Princess Pans or “puellas” (Latin for girl, versus male “puers”). They pursue the pleasure principle with equal abandon, careful not to tie themselves down to anything that might limit their future choices.

Freedom, in a consumer society, means freedom of choice—a wider, broader, deeper menu of shopping options—instant gratification of any whim, whimsy or addiction of choice.

On the jagged edge of the bell curve is a new breed of Uber-Pans who embrace the Peter Pan Syndrome as a badge of honor. With no vision for the future except their own quest for more experiences and pleasure, they consciously avoid putting down roots or limiting their lives by making commitments. They see adulthood as a thinly veiled attempt to turn them into worker drones, slaving away in service of capitalism and/or a Queen Bee baby-mama who needs a sugar daddy to bankroll her baby habit. For Uber-Pans, not growing up is an act of political defiance.

The good news/bad news is this: You never have to grow up—ever. It’s no longer embarrassing to be a teenager in your forties, fifties, or eighties. There’s no need to “come of age” in your teens or have a “mid-life crisis” in your forties or slip into a “second childhood” in your dotage—your first childhood is still alive and kicking...at your self-esteem.

Adolescence is no longer a stage we pass through; it is *the* stage—replete with spotlights and footlights—on which we play out our lives. It’s the water we breathe and the air we drink, keeping us...

FOREVER JUNG

Our theme is growing up—or rather, the uniquely modern resistance to growing up, if not absolute refusal.

The concept of *puer aeternus* (eternal youth) is nothing new. The Roman poet Ovid wrote about a child-god, later identified with Dionysus and Eros, who embodied the modern ethos of “forever young.” A few millennia later, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung identified *puer aeternus* as a classic archetype of the human psyche, characterized by whimsy, intoxication, disorder and unrestrained impulse—the opposite of the *senex* (old man), which is rational, responsible, disciplined, and controlled.

Who would you rather be?

In current psychology, a puer is any adult whose emotional truck somehow got stalled in adolescence. Puers and puellas lead provisional lives—improvised, ad hoc, no-strings-attached, play-it-by-ear, keep-all-options-open—a restless life of permanent limbo fueled by a constant search for pleasurable distractions. They know how to live in the present, but have no future—lots of grandiose dreams, but no concrete plans to make them come true.

A NEW PAN-DEMIC

Public awareness of the man-boy phenomenon began with Dr. Dan Kiley’s 1983 bestseller, *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up*. The book clearly hit a nerve, selling over 200,000 hardcover copies and millions of paperbacks in 22 languages. That’s a lot of women buying books and hoping their boyfriends will read them.

Clearly, it didn't work. Modern male-female relations are still mired in post-feminist gender confusion, which has bled down the generations to the point where gender itself has been redefined out of existence.

The Sixties left men trapped in mid-evolution—like fish with feet, we flop and flail on the shore, unsure who we are or how we should walk or talk, especially with the opposite sex. Gender confusion was once a problem; now it is the goal, the gold standard toward which we evolve and “progress.”

Here in the 21st century, male resistance to growing up has expanded from a pop-psychology syndrome to a full-fledged pandemic, a “resistance” movement that has become more and more entrenched with each new generation.

ALAS, POOR WENDY

Peter Pans are charming, adventurous, spontaneous, and fun beyond all endurance. Their boyish enthusiasm triggers Wendy's maternal instincts, leading her to adopt, protect, and nurture this naïve, naughty boy. (The non-binary world has its own versions of this.)

Wendy ultimately ends up enabling Peter—paying his bills, excusing his excesses, covering his messes—as Kiley pointed out in his 1984 follow-up book, *The Wendy Dilemma: When Women Stop Mothering Their Men*.

Since the 1960s, “manolescents” have proliferated to the point where many women have either given up on men altogether, or drastically scaled back their expectations. Surveying a roomful of male “peers” for a suitable partner, many women find themselves thinking, “He's not ready... He's not ready... Nope.”

Many younger women, given the lack of options, have embraced the kinder, gentler, softer men who have liberated themselves from masculinity. Others resign themselves to the thankless role of being the sole “adult” in the relationship.

Modern Pans cannot exist without a Wendy, their surrogate mom and girlfriend-with-benefits, or some other Wendy-like parent, patron, lover or institution (rich daddy, sugar momma, trust fund, unemployment checks). As long as there is a Wendy to provide emotional and financial support, Peter can maintain his eternally youthful lifestyle forever.

The irony is that the same qualities that attract modern Wendys to these dreamy fly-boys will eventually, and inevitably, repel them.

PETER'S SHADOW

To understand the mythos of Peter Pan we must go back to 1904, the turn of the (other) century, when *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* debuted on the London stage. J.M. Barrie's “fairy play” of an ageless boy from Neverland was an instant hit—Queen Victoria was a fan—and it soon crossed the Atlantic to the bright gaslights of Broadway, an international sensation.

Audiences first encountered Peter Pan eavesdropping on the Darling family, listening outside the window as Wendy's mother told bedtime stories to Wendy, Michael and John. We first see Peter as a lonely outsider looking in, a lost boy longing for the mother and family he left behind. Leaving one's parents is an essential component of growing up, but Peter wants it all—to be independent *and* to never grow up. Those impulses leave him

torn—aching for the nurture of mother and the comfort of family, but fearing that Mom (or a future surrogate mother) will pin him down and “make him a man”—turn him into a model citizen, i.e., a dull Victorian adult.

Wendy spies Peter at the window, and in Peter’s haste to escape, he accidentally leaves his “shadow” behind—his dark secret, now exposed, that he aches to belong to a family, and is not as happy and carefree as he wants to believe. Wendy protects Peter’s Jungian shadow, and when he returns, sews it back on. Smitten with this mothering young girl, Peter invites Wendy to Neverland to be the mother of his self-made family, the Lost Boys. (Wendy is young like Peter, and less likely to boss him around—which makes her a safer mom-substitute than Wendy’s actual mother, Mrs. Darling.)

To fill out his new family, Peter adopts Wendy’s younger brothers John and Michael as well, and they all fly back to his hobbled-together posse, tribe and gangster family, the Lost Boys.

Peter’s ambivalence toward mothers—and, by extension, all women—was no accident. One of Barrie’s early titles for the play was *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Hated Mothers*. To underscore Peter’s anti-mother bias, Barrie wanted the actress who played Wendy’s mother to play Captain Hook as well.

Of course, Barrie had mixed feelings about Peter Pan, too. Before adding Captain Hook to the production (an afterthought designed to buy time for a scene change), Barrie described Peter as a “demon boy” and the “villain” of his story.

Wendy begins to fall in love with Peter, but when she asks him about his feelings for her, he answers—like Oedipus in reverse—that he feels like her “faithful son.” Wendy eventually

becomes homesick for England, but before she can return, she and the Lost Boys are kidnapped by Captain Hook. Hook represents Peter's skewed vision of adulthood as something sophisticated, evil and haunted by mortality, as symbolized by the ticking clock in his crocodile stalker. Peter eventually defeats Captain Hook, and with it the threat of adulthood, since growing up equals death. He thereby wins the eternal youth he craves, but in the process loses Wendy, who brings the Lost Boys back to London, where they are adopted by Wendy's mother. Mrs. Darling offers to adopt Peter as well, but he refuses, afraid she will "catch him and make him a man"—a dull, bumbling, no-fun dad like Mr. Darling.

At the end of the play, Peter is completely alone. He has won his freedom, but has no one to share it with.

Peter Pan is ultimately a tragic figure.

BARRIE MAN-ALONE

The real-life childhood of Scottish novelist and playwright J.M. Barrie sounds like a case study by his contemporary Sigmund Freud.

James Matthew Barrie was only six years old when his older brother David—his mother's favorite—died suddenly in an ice-skating accident the day before his 14th birthday. Six-year-old James, whose physical stature as an adult—under 5'4"—never matched his literary stature, tried to fill the gaping maw in his mother's heart by wearing his older brother's clothes and adopting his signature whistle. In his mother's grief, she once mistook J.M. for her deceased son and called out, "Is that you?" In a "little lonely voice," Barrie answered, "No, it's no' him... It's just me."

Just me.

That's tragic enough, but it gets worse.

Young Barrie's mother comforted herself with the thought that her dead son David would remain a boy forever—he would never grow up, and therefore would never leave her. As parent-rescuing children are wont to do, Barrie embraced his mother's fantasy—and his dead brother's arrested development—and eventually became an adult version of Peter Pan—mischievous, playful, eternally innocent and pre-sexual (the reason Barrie's wife later divorced him).

LITTLE ORPHAN ANGRY

Rejection, or at least perceived rejection, is at the broken heart of the Peter Pan Syndrome.

Peter Pan's first literary appearance was as a week-old fairy/bird/baby in Barrie's earlier novel *The Little White Bird* (1902). Tiny, free-spirited Peter flies away from home to live and play with other birds and fairies in London's Kensington Gardens. He is confident his mother will leave the window open for him, but when he finally returns home, he finds the windows barred—and sees his mother inside cuddling a new baby.

Peter has been forgotten, replaced. No wonder he resents and even hates the mother his heart longs for. Her love was not unconditional—quite the contrary. When he begins to exercise his freedom and autonomy, daring to explore a life separate from his mother—even temporarily—he is immediately forgotten and “dead” to her. The message is clear: Grown-ups, or at least mothers—or at least his mother, who represents all mothers and therefore all women—don't want you to be free and independent—i.e., to become adults. Peter's mother, like J.M.

Barrie's mother, wanted her son to remain a little boy, frozen in time—darling, docile, dead. Peter's desire for freedom and independence costs him the love he needs to truly survive and thrive.

But Peter is a scrappy little orphan. He puts on a brave face and sculpts his pain into a mask of happy defiance: *I don't need you, mother. I don't need anyone! I'm free!*

AGE APPROPRIATE

There is a good side of Peter Pan, of course. The playful, innocent, imaginative qualities for which Peter Pan is generally known—the “Disney” version of Pan—are what we expect and want for all children.

Walt Disney's 1953 animated film *Peter Pan* reinvented J.M. Barrie's demon-boy as a delightful, exuberant adventurer and optimist with no real dark side. The new, sanitized Pan is the embodiment of childhood innocence, with nary a hint of sadness, irony, or self-awareness. Stripped of Barrie's shadow, the feel-good Pan is childlike not childish, mischievous not selfish, charming but never cruel. He's not a lonely or tragic figure—he's happy, inspiring, harmless—an evangelist for eternal youth who invites us to re-experience the wonder and fantasy of childhood—to see the world once again through the eyes of a little child.

Childhood innocence is a beautiful thing, to be nurtured, protected and prized. When we hear that a child has been robbed of their childhood—by abuse, poverty, war, or fronting your family's Motown band at age six—we are saddened and upset, and rightly so.

There's nothing negative about Peter Pan—it's all good—*if* you happen to be an infant, toddler, preschooler, tween, or porn-and-game-addicted teen. Peter Pan turns dark—turns into a Syndrome—only after you “age out” of childhood and become what is known in academic circles as a “grown-ass man.”

When Barrie published a novelization of his play in 1911, he opened the book with the line: “All children, except one, grow up.” Victorian readers would have been intrigued at the thought of a boy who refused to grow up—what a novel idea! Today's readers are also surprised, but for the opposite reason:

What do you mean, all children grow up—since when?

COMING OF AGES

The Peter Pan *Syndrome*—refusing to grow up, whether consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly—doesn't become relevant until it's *time* to grow up.

But when is that, exactly? When does, or should, adulthood begin?

- a) When you turn 13 and your parents throw you a lavish, expensive bar mitzvah?
- b) When you get a driver's license, and can legally drive two tons of death-metal through town?
- c) When you turn 17 and can buy tickets to the R-rated movies you've been watching since childhood?
- d) When you turn 18 and can join the Army, die for your country, and begin amassing massive credit card debt?

- e) When you turn 21 and can buy alcohol, go to bars, and get carded without a fake ID?
- f) When you graduate from a four-year college, get your masters degree, and finish your post-doctoral thesis—so you can start life fresh in your parents' basement with hundreds of thousands of dollars in student debt?
- g) When the men of your tribe kidnap you and take you into the woods for weeks of painful but exhilarating male-bonding rituals?

It's a trick question, of course. The real answer is: None of the Above. Adulthood has been postponed indefinitely, perhaps forever. Apologies for any inconvenience.