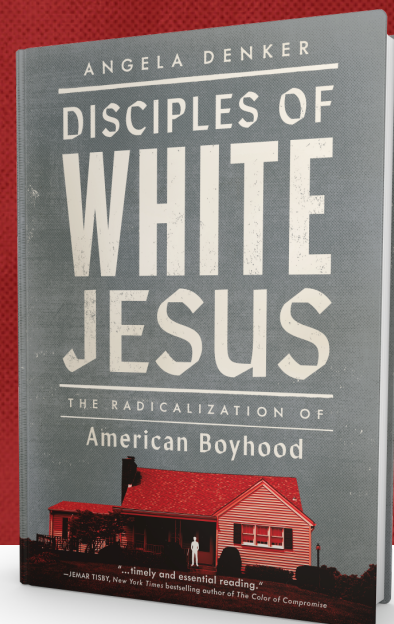


## BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

# DISCIPLES OF WHITE JESUS

## THE RADICALIZATION OF AMERICAN BOYHOOD

ANGELA DENKER



### INTRODUCTION

- What comes to mind for you when you hear the words “American boyhood”?
- What comes to mind for you when you hear the words “White Jesus”?
- Denker describes an experience of sitting around the table with the other moms of her son’s basketball teammates. They talked about their son’s anxieties, and about wanting them to grow up without losing their vulnerability. Have you been a part of similar conversations? What do you want for the boys in your life?

### CHAPTER 1: The Violence of White Christian Masculinity

- This chapter describes three congregations: St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church, Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and St. Paul’s Lutheran Church. What similarities do you notice in Denker’s descriptions of these three church communities? What differences?
- Denker meets three teenage boys at St. Matthew’s Mardi Gras dinner: John, Ryan, and Travis, who expressed their fears about “being cancelled” and their worries that more access to opportunities for Black Americans might mean something less for them. Do you resonate with those fears?
  - How do you react to Denker’s response that “anxiety about the future and one’s place in the world is a normal part of growing up. It’s just that in America, too often we haven’t allowed white boys to experience those normal anxieties and insecurities. We’ve taught them to push those feelings down, cover them up with machismo and bravado and projected strength . . . better to normalize those feelings.”
- The story of Dylan Roof and the Emanuel Nine is well known. What new details emerged for you in this retelling?
- Denker reminds us in this chapter that “Roof’s story is not singular.” What ties can you draw between his story and your own?
- Denker closes out the chapter by quoting from Rev. Yehiel Curry on what it means to “be a man outside of the box.” Which boxes of manhood are you being motivated to smash, and how?

## CHAPTER 2: White Christian Men: Archetype and Reality

- In what ways does Connor confound your expectations for a cadet at the Citadel? In what ways does he confirm them?
- What, in your view, is our responsibility as a society when “nearly all mass shooters are men,<sup>i</sup> more than half of them white,<sup>ii</sup> and 70 percent of suicides involve white, middle-aged men,<sup>iii</sup> while two-thirds of mass shootings can be linked to domestic violence<sup>iv</sup>”?
- Denker states in this chapter that “unwritten rules are being rewritten in America right now, especially when it comes to gender roles and religion.” What are some of those unwritten rules, and how do you see them changing?

## CHAPTER 3: Created in His God’s Image?

- What images/descriptions of “the image of God” most resonate with you?
- Denker makes a direct connection in this chapter between *theological* assertions (made by Mark Driscoll, John Piper, and many others) and *sociological* outcomes related to masculinity and violence. What ties do you see between these religious narratives and widespread cultural trends?
- Denker states that: “The most powerful story of Jesus I try to pass on to my churches (and to my boys) is the story where Jesus, too, wept, at the death of his friend, Lazarus.<sup>v</sup> In this moment of vulnerability, relationship, friendship, and connection, Jesus is at his most deeply human and most powerfully divine. He is also a model for men and boys.” Which other Jesus stories would you draw from to model a different kind of masculinity?

## CHAPTER 4: WWJB: Who Would Jesus Be?

- In Denker’s retelling of the story of Jesus overturning tables in the temple from Matthew 21, what new details emerged for you?
- Even if you haven’t been directly exposed to complementarian ideas (the idea that men and women are prescribed different and distinct roles, with men always in positions of headship and women in positions of support), how have these teachings shown up in your family?
- This chapter tells the story of Karah and Noah, who are trying to raise their sons with a different set of values. What values are you hoping to pass on to the boys in your life?

## CHAPTER 5: Oppressors and Victims

- The chapter begins with two assertions: Men and boys are the problem. Men and boys are in trouble. Which of these two assertions has held more sway for you in the past? How about after reading this book?
- On pages 84–91, Denker offers a “catalogue of the problems of men’s and boys’ investment into a violent and self-serving masculinity,” including the stories of a woman murdered for flying a rainbow flag, a professional women’s football player in Spain who was forced to kiss the former president of the football federation, the work of male anti-abortion activists, and the violence of January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionists, among other stories. Which of these examples stood out to you most, and what does it say to you about the harm and risk to us all posed by militant masculinity?
- Denker argues that “we have far too little cultural understanding and too few popular examples of boys who shy away from physical contact and prefer quiet, intellectual or emotional discussions (and,

for that matter, too few examples of girls who require a lot of physical and sensory input to thrive).” Can you think of any popular examples that defy these norms? What do these countercultural examples offer for young boys (and girls) today?

## CHAPTER 6: Schoolboys

- Denker opens this chapter by saying, “I grew up believing in the magical power of the American public school system,” and talking about her childhood school memories. What was your experience of school growing up? What parts of your experience do you hope today’s children share? What parts do you hope are different?
- Denker interviews Joe in this chapter, a teacher and coach in the Minneapolis Public School district. How would you describe the masculinity that Joe is modeling for his students?
- Denker also interviews Amy in this chapter, a rural educator and mom of boys who describes the difficulty her male students have with showing emotion and asking for help. What impacts do you see on young male students when they aren’t given space or support to process their emotions and difficult experiences?

## CHAPTER 7: To Fear and Love God So That?: Confirming White Boys in the Faith

- This chapter opens with a troubling story of teen boys in a rural Midwestern church confirmation class who envisioned a racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic world. Why do you imagine those boys were able to devolve to those conclusions so quickly and easily? And why do you imagine they were able to self-reflect just as quickly?
- At the end of the section labeled “Raising ‘Pure’ Teens,” Denker asks: “The rigid teachings might give boys a framework from which to approach the world, but what about when they, or people they love, inevitably step out of that framework. Then what?” How would you respond?
- In this chapter, Denker introduces us to Dan and Janine, confirmation teachers in southwestern Minnesota. What do you make of their story and their efforts to introduce their students to a different image of Jesus?

## CHAPTER 8: Innocuous White Supremacists and Midwestern Small Towns

- If your ancestors immigrated to the United States, where and when did they settle? Which Indigenous peoples occupied that land before?
- Reflecting on her own ancestors’ immigration to Minnesota, Denker says: “I can tell myself that we are not culpable somehow for the atrocities committed on these lands. But to cut myself off from those stories is like trying to cut yourself off from humanity in general, and, of course, that is impossible. So instead we bury our guilt with niceness and hard work and duty and religion. But what is it doing to our boys?” How have you tried to bury any guilt you might feel about past atrocities? And how do you answer Denker’s question about what this is doing to our boys?
- Put yourself in the shoes of the people living in Murdock, Minnesota. How would you respond if a white supremacist group bought property in your community?

## CHAPTER 9: Wild West, Wild Men, and De-radicalization

- In this chapter we meet Caleb, a former skinhead. What do you take away from his story of getting drawn into and then out of white supremacist ways of thinking?
- Caleb describes getting “overwhelming pushback” when he preached about racism on the Sunday following George Floyd’s murder in May 2020. What sort of messages did you hear from leaders in your community during that time, and what sort of pushback did they receive?
- Denker says that “Caleb’s story reminds us that just as many roads lead in, toward radicalization and violence and despair for boys and young white men in America, many roads also lead out.” Can you name some of those roads out?
- We also meet Antonio in this chapter, a trans man pursuing a career as a chaplain. What unique lens on masculinity does Antonio bring?

## CONCLUSION

- What would you include in a listicle on “Ten Ways to Keep Your Son from Becoming an Angry Misogynist”? What other listicle might you be tempted to write after reading this book?
- Denker suggests that “only the stories can save us.” What stories from this book will you carry with you?

## NOTES

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i Michel Martin and Emma Bowman, “Why Nearly All Mass Shooters are Men,” All Things Considered, podcast audio, March 27, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/27/981803154/why-nearly-all-mass-shooters-are-men>.

ii “Number of Mass Shootings in the United States between 1982 and December 2023, by Shooter’s Race or Ethnicity,” Statista, January 8, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/476456/mass-shootings-in-the-us-by-shooter-s-race/>.

iii “KSHB: Suicide Rates High in Middle-Aged White Men,” Saint Luke’s Kansas City, September 21, 2022, <https://www.saintlukeskc.org/about/news/kshb-suicide-rates-high-middle-aged-white-men>.

iv Lisa Geller, “Study: Two-Thirds of Mass Shootings Linked to Domestic Violence,” The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, 2021, <https://efsgv.org/press/study-two-thirds-of-mass-shootings-linked-to-domestic-violence/>.

v See John 11:1–44.