

Leaving guyland

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [December 24, 2014](#) issue



In *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, Michael Kimmel writes about cultural pressure on young men to obey rules that prohibit them from showing emotion or any sign of weakness. Movies and stories for little boys tend to train them to act according to this concept of what it means to be male. In much of popular culture, men are reduced to animals, to testosterone, with little room to acknowledge themselves as God’s image bearers.

But there are glimmers of hope.

The animated film *Big Hero 6* opens with a boy named Hiro who gets himself into mortal peril in the sort of truncated “guyland” where emotion is forbidden and violence glorified. The setting is a city called San Fransokyo, where big, dangerous men are betting big, dangerous money on robot fights. Hiro slips in with a feigned wide-eyed innocence and a remarkable little robot he has built.

Hiro is a prodigy, but he’s a cynical one. His brother Tadashi wants more for him, and drags Hiro into the engineering lab where Tadashi is a student. Seeing the “nerd lab” and the delightful nerds in it converts Hiro. His imagination is sparked, and he wants to go to school. This sounds preachy and manipulative, but Disney’s animation studio pulls it off by doing what it does best: display the lure and power of imagination.

The nerd lab is a den of intellectual and physical delights. It’s full of Tadashi’s quirky friends—male and female—following their hearts’ desires and inventing beautiful things. Hiro is intrigued by Tadashi’s project—an inflatable health-care robot named

Baymax that looks like a giant marshmallow and is programmed to nurture and heal.

We viewers are able to keep believing in these kids and their creative efforts because the movie doesn't turn Hiro into a corporate drone; it plays on all that's most fun in the boy movie genres. It provides superheroes and crime-fighting tech, a villain, and a revenge story. Who doesn't want a superhero suit perfectly suited to one's research interests? There's fire and battle.

But the central task for Hiro and his friends isn't to get the bad guy; it's for Hiro to overcome the limiting boundaries of guyland. He's tempted to adopt the violence that powers the villain. He's tempted to shut down emotion and relationships. But he overcomes these temptations. Hiro is not, finally, the hero of the story—it takes a team of smart, brave friends to explode guyland and find something bigger and better.

The film is visually and emotionally imaginative and expansive. It plays with genre and disrupts it in ways that just might inspire boys to expand instead of to shrink. When I asked my son what he liked about *Big Hero 6*, he said, "Everything."

In that, I find hope. Rather than whittling off bits of our children, *Big Hero 6* might encourage them to expand into the full human beings God created them to be.