

Explore Ladies & Real Men

Gender-specific taboos are very powerful. We have all been told how “ladies” act and don’t act, or what makes a “nice girl” or a “bad girl.” We have all been told what qualities makes up a “real man.” We have pictures of these people in our heads. Maybe our ladies wear short white gloves and our real men ride horses. Maybe our ladies never speak about bodily functions, or they titter instead of laugh. Maybe our real men grunt in embarrassment and shuffle their feet when they speak about loving their mother.

Even though these seem like out-moded beliefs, they are deep-rooted and color our writing. To explore your beliefs about ladies and real men, and how they may be affecting you without your awareness, try this exercise: Write for 10 minutes, or complete 2 notebook-sized pages in longhand, in which every sentence starts with one of the following phrases

ladies never
ladies don't
ladies always
ladies are
real men never
real men don't
real men always
real men are

You'll probably be surprised.

Here's what I wrote on the subject of ladies and real men. (Notice that I broke my own rule – not every sentence begins with one of the above phrases. This is because I don't like rules, even when they're my own!)

Ladies never spit. That's what my mother told me. I was confused because what about brushing your teeth? But my mother said that was different because you brushed your teeth in the bathroom with the door closed, and ladies of course never let anyone into the bathroom with them. I wonder why my mother thought spitting was so bad. She was raised in a mountain logging town, and her father was a rough and rugged lumberjack. He cussed and laughed at dirty jokes and wore filthy clothes to work and tied flies on his bloody fishing line with his teeth. And yet she seemed to love him, and I know for a fact he spit, because I'd seen him do it. But he was a real man so it was different. When my own daughters became teenagers they loved to horrify me by spitting in the bushes or on the sidewalks. Just like my mother, I was disgusted. How could they, their grandmother's granddaughters, behave so crudely? I think they still do spit, but now they are adults and don't take as much delight in horrifying me.

©2006, Kim Pearson