



Confronting Toxic Masculinity in South African Society: A Review of Jeffrey Rakabe's *Led by Shepherds: An Initiate's Memoir* (Jacana Media 2025)

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As South Africans, we have all wondered what lessons are imparted during initiation; how do they help boys become men? While it is common lore to protect the challenges that young boys face, the protection means that it also gets clouded in silence, making it difficult to interrogate its effectiveness.

Jeffery Rakabe's gripping memoir, *Led by Shepherds* changes that. Rakabe invites readers into the visceral world of male initiation, called Koma which is seen for its austerity and immense contribution to toxic masculinity. He recounts his experience as a 12-year-old who embarks on the journey of transitioning from boyhood to manhood. While he initially desired the experience, he finds it brutal and marked by pain and harmful lessons about the oppression of women. He vividly recounts his journey to the mountain, led by a shepherd named Eric, who builds fear and curiosity through stories during

their journey. Rakabe uses evocative language, vivid description and a conversational narrative style to question this process of ‘the making of a man’. Beyond the initiation, Rakabe also covers his later move to Johannesburg for university where he explores the experiences of navigating the city with the help of his supportive partner.

Although the initiation transforms him into a man that society wishes him to be, and whom he had once desired to be, Rakabe recounts how, in hindsight, he is disappointed by the lingering effects of initiation. As a young boy, he recalls dealing with the physical trials of a painful circumcision procedure and the struggle to ward off cold, hunger and thirst. Rakabe details the strict rules and peculiar language needed to prove one’s manhood. Central to the narrative is the fear of being labelled a ‘leshoboro’ – a coward or weakling – a social pressure that fuels the struggle to endure. Rakabe acknowledges that traditional circumcision is a powerful symbol and not merely a physical act, but he also highlights how it contributes to the stripping of identity. As a 12-year-old at that time, with no rigid or set character, he explores how it contributed to how he saw life afterwards. As an adult, he explores how manhood is essentially about survival, about enduring pain and fitting in, with no genuine growth. He describes it as an inimical process that is emotionally taxing and enforces a narrow definition of manhood that is based on stoicism and control.

Rakabe thus questions whether initiation, intended to shape boys into men, inadvertently teaches dominance and perpetuates toxic traits, particularly concerning the treatment of women, which is evident in the crude and demeaning chants and attitudes encountered in the lodge, asking if these rituals feed the cycle of violence against women. Rakabe reflects on how the so-called “lessons” he received reinforces a restrictive model of masculinity—one that demands emotional suppression and equates vulnerability with weakness. This rigid framework rejects traits perceived as feminine, such as expressing pain or shedding tears, positioning them as signs of fragility rather than legitimate human experiences. Hence, more than just a personal memoir, the book makes a powerful connection between these traditional experiences and broader societal issues of masculinity and violence. Rakabe challenges the

casual jokes that diminish women, recognising their role in reinforcing gender-based violence in society. He expresses how deeply these attitudes, alongside the crisis of femicide, have affected him. Through his reflections, he urges men to unlearn harmful behaviors and dismantle toxic masculinity. By confronting these ingrained norms, he challenges the idea that masculinity must be built on endurance at the cost of emotional authenticity. His reflection underscores the harm such conditioning inflicts—not only on individuals who struggle to express themselves but also on broader societal dynamics that normalise detachment and emotional repression. Through Rakabe’s memoir we see that many young men find themselves having to honour the cultural traditions which do not benefit them and feel as though they are navigating two worlds.

Rakabe’s willingness to confront uncomfortable truths shows bravery and personal growth and makes this a compelling and necessary read that leaves one questioning our current cultural expectations and their social effects. *Led by Shepherds* is an insightful narrative that challenges readers to look beyond tradition and question the very definition of manhood. His mental and psychological turmoil suggests that the rite of passage which he was supposed to feel safe in, significantly contributed to personal trauma, but also a learning curve which he gets to share with others as an act of resistance against the pressure to conform to the harmful standards. It is a call to parents to not conform to practices of which they are not fully unaware. This memoir serves as a poignant example of the need to question traditional customs and their impact, to question the lesson and their effectiveness, to decenter toxicity which initiation perpetuates. ■