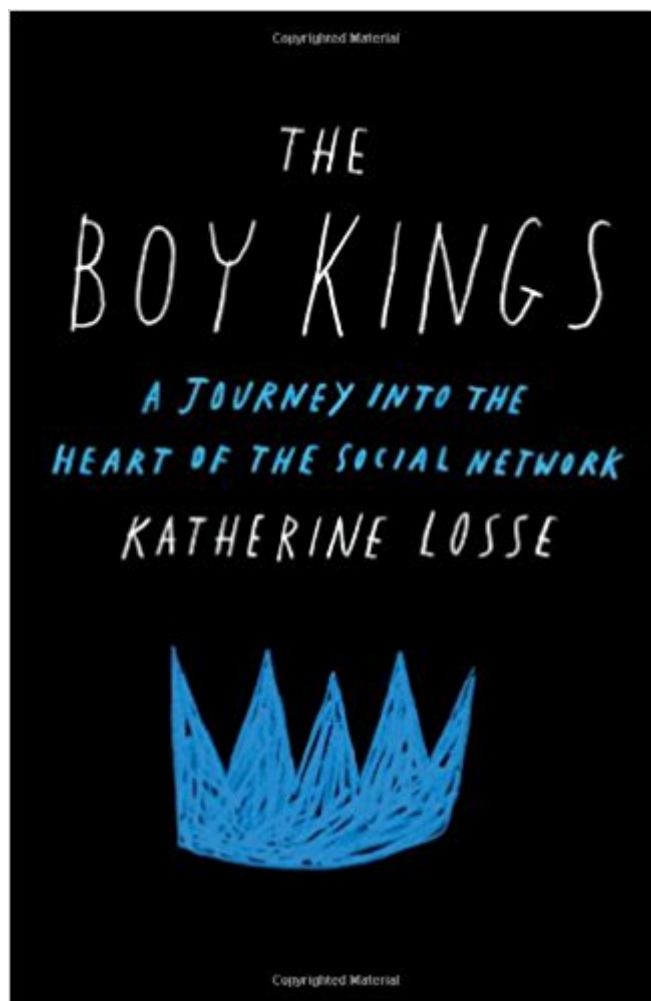


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The Boy Kings: A Journey Into The Heart Of The Social Network



Synopsis

Kate Losse was a grad school refugee when she joined Facebook as employee #51 in 2005. Hired to answer user questions such as “What is a poke?” and “Why can’t I access my ex-girlfriend’s profile?” her early days at the company were characterized by a sense of camaraderie, promise, and ambition: Here was a group of scrappy young upstarts on a mission to rock Silicon Valley and change the world. Over time, this sense of mission became so intense that working for Facebook felt like more than just a job; it implied a wholehearted dedication to “the cause.” Employees were incentivized to live within one mile of the office, summers were spent carousing at the company pool house, and female employees were told to wear T-shirts with founder Mark Zuckerberg’s profile picture on his birthday. Losse started to wonder what this new medium meant for real-life relationships: Would Facebook improve our social interactions? Or would we all just adapt our behavior to the habits and rules of these brilliant but socially awkward Internet savants who have become today’s youngest power players? Increasingly skeptical, Losse graduated from customer service to the internationalization team – tasked with rolling out Facebook to the rest of the world – finally landing a seat right outside Zuckerberg’s office as his personal ghostwriter, the voice of the boy king. This book takes us for the first time into the heart of this fast-growing information empire, inviting us to high-level meetings with Zuckerberg; lifting the veil on long nights of relentless hacking and trolling; taking us behind the scenes of raucous company parties; and introducing us to the personalities, values, and secret ambitions of the floppy-haired boy wonders who are redefining the way we live, love, and work. By revealing here what’s really driving both the business and the culture of the social network, Losse answers the biggest question of all: What kind of world is Facebook trying to build, and is it the world we want to live in? ***

“Logging on to Facebook that first day, in retrospect, was the second, and to date the last, time that any technology has captured my imagination. The first was when Apple advertised the first laptop, the PowerBook, in the 1990s – with the words, “What’s on your PowerBook?” “World domination,” my teenaged self- answered instinctively. That’s what these devices were made for, I thought: so small and yet so powerful, so capable of linking quickly to and between everything else in the world. From the laptop, I could write and distribute information faster than ever before. It was intoxicating to imagine, and Facebook’s sudden, faithful rendering in 2004 of the physical world into the virtual felt the same. What could you do, now that you could see and connect to everyone and everything, instantly? “But what, also, could be diminished by such quick access? In the realm of ideas,

it seemed easy: Who wouldn't want to distribute and discuss ideas widely? However, in the realm of the personal, it seemed more complicated. What was the benefit of doing everything in public? Is information itself neutral, or do different types of information have different values, different levels of expectation of privacy, different implications for distribution and consumption? Should all information be shared equally quickly and without regard to my relationship to it? And, finally, and most important, as we ask whenever we begin a new relationship with anything, would this be good for me?

From the Introduction

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Customer Reviews

"In her dark, hypnotic memoir of working at Facebook during its rising years, Katherine Losse tests Mark Zuckerberg's dogmatic belief in transparency's inherent good by removing the privacy controls on his own life. The result is a reluctantly Machiavellian guidebook to Silicon Valley and a strong endorsement for maintaining a separate social life rather than a fully public 'pics or it didn't happen' one." --The Daily "The Boy Kings" needs a place on your summer reading list. Losse made me think twice about how I socialize with people, and how exactly that came to be--and it just might encourage you to hop offline and appreciate non-virtual reality." --Glamour

Katherine Losse was born in Phoenix, Arizona, and holds a master's degree in English from Johns Hopkins University. She lives in Marfa, Texas.

"Social graces--and privacy and psychological well-being, for that matter--are just obstacles in the way of having more information." -page 43

"In the end, no matter how much we tried, we couldn't use technology to produce love. Because love, unlike technology and its uses, requires commitment to one, instead of the broadcast and consumption of many bits of distant, digital content. Love doesn't scale." -page 90

"This was always the case with social-media technology: It meant no harm, but that did not mean it would not cause it.... Facebook doesn't hurt people: People hurt people. This is true. But just as Facebook makes it possible to do things faster, more efficiently, more cheaply, it makes it possible to hurt people faster, more efficiently, with less cost to themselves." -page 93

"... perhaps your own perfection is what you would have to believe in if everyone else in the world isn't good enough. And that's why you'd want to reinvent a world in which everything had to appear perfect, all the time, as if forcing everyone else to believe in being perfect, too, or at least try.... I just wanted to be happy and loved for who I was and I wasn't sure all the algorithms or fame in the world could produce that." -page 135

"What I was seeing was that social websites were playing upon the biggest open and unsolved wound in our society: the need to be known, the need to be loved. It was unclear if they were meeting this need." -page 139

"I was getting paid to go on a trip around the world, first class. 'That's a nice gig,' my dad said after I told him I'd be out of the country for a month. 'Yes, it is,' I concurred, relieved and excited." -page 157

"Everyone wanted to see everything. This was all justified under the company's corporate buzzword, transparency, though no one seemed to know exactly what it meant. The fact that it was hard to define led Mark [Zuckerberg] to begin a discussion on the company's internal discussion page asking everyone to submit ideas for what transparency was. For some, like Mark, who posted in the thread with everyone else, the word transparency seemed to ring of enforced integrity, as if in a transparent world there could be no lies, no hidden information, and that nothing bad could happen because everyone knew everything about everyone." -page 174

The first five quotes above show some of Kate Losse's thoughts on emotional implications as they related to Facebook's corporate goals during her first two years working at the company. The limitations of social media in fulfilling people's emotional needs were often on her mind as was the emotional damage people could cause, very quickly, via social media posts and comments. The sixth quote above simply relates that Losse traveled overseas for Facebook for a month at a time, similar to Annie in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*. Losse is more like Annie than Mae (*The Circle*'s main character) in that she tows the corporate line for her social media company, travels overseas doing work to grow her company's global presence before eventually burning out (though in a different, less dramatic way than

Annie). The final quote above draws the closest parallel between this book and *The Circle*: the specific use of the term "transparency" in Facebook's internal discussions as described by Losse, just as Eggers makes "transparency" an actual program initiated at *The Circle* in which people wear body cameras and broadcast their lives 24/7. Either Eggers actually did read Losse's book and borrowed heavily from it in his fiction, or there are uncanny similarities between what Eggers dreamed up for *The Circle* and the way Losse described her actual experiences at Facebook. Either way, as I wrote in my review of *The Circle*, the question of just how much of their personal lives people should share on social media is significant and will only grow in significance as technology continues to improve. Facebook Live now advertises on television. At the moment, people can go Live on Facebook by filming with their smartphones or iPad or similar device, but who's to say we won't very, very soon live in a world where tiny, low cost, unnoticeable cameras can be planted by anyone, anywhere, to show us their surroundings at any given time, live? A world where anyone could be on camera at any moment without his or her knowledge, a world in which there's nobody to whom a person can complain about being on camera without his or her knowledge because the right for all to see that film footage outweighs the right for anyone to choose not to be filmed. Here's the last sentence from that last quote above, again: "For some, like Mark [Zuckerberg], who posted in the thread with everyone else, the word transparency seemed to ring of enforced integrity, as if in a transparent world there could be no lies, no hidden information, and that nothing bad could happen because everyone knew everything about everyone." If the above quoted sentence, in light of Facebook's approximately \$350 billion market valuation (at the time of this review) and Zuckerberg's own extreme wealth and influence, does not have the potential to end privacy, to create a world where, as Margaret Atwood wrote in her review of *The Circle* for *The New York Review of Books*, "Privacy is Theft," I can't imagine what does.

Facebook, as portrayed in Kate Losse's book *The Boy Kings* is a case study of Silicon Valley culture in the twenty-first century. In many dimensions, Facebook is an impressive achievement that has taken years of engineering work. As I write this, Facebook has a billion users, spread throughout the world. Ms. Losse was involved in the birth of some of Facebook's first overseas networks and was the program manager for the internationalization effort. Facebook has defined social networking and has changed the way many people interact. Along with its impressive achievements, the Facebook described by Ms. Loose can also be seen as an exemplar of many of the things that are wrong with The Valley. In 1956 William Whyte wrote a book titled *The Organization Man*. In *Businessweek*, David Leonard writes that *The Organization Man* was "A

critique of society as much as business culture, the book diagnosed groupthink--a term Whyte coined--in the suburbs as well as the boardroom, and became one of the century's most influential pieces of commentary." Although Facebook claims that their ethos is "move fast and break things", what they have created in many ways mirrors the corporations of their Grandfather's generation. Corporations in the 1950s expected conformity and so it is with Facebook and many other Silicon Valley Companies. I once spoke to a start-up that was building a "App" for the Apple iPhone which, they claimed, was going to change the world (an iPhone App, really?) The actual nature of this change is rarely stated but everyone is supposed to buy into the idea that they are doing transformative work. From the beginning, Mark Zuckerberg has believed that Facebook has a mission that will change the world. The mission of connectedness and "transparency" (where all your information is public). The "mission" is something that employees are supposed to endorse or at least never openly question. At one point in the book Ms. Losse recounts a conversation she had with a manager who said that one of the people in his group didn't "get" the mission and he was going to have to fire her. Facebook employees are expected to be enthusiastic users of Facebook, displaying their curated public personas. In the 1950s large corporations mostly employed white protestant men. Women were usually secretaries and the idea that a woman could run the corporation would have been considered outlandish. As Ms. Losse describes Facebook, the culture is similarly homogeneous. Almost all of the engineering staff is under 30 and male. Mark Zuckerberg famously said: "I want to stress the importance of being young and technical," he stated. If you want to found a successful company, you should only hire young people with technical expertise. "Young people are just smarter," he said with a straight face. "Why are most chess masters under 30?" he asked. "I don't know," he answered. "Young people just have simpler lives. We may not own a car. We may not have family." In the absence of those distractions, he says, you can focus on big ideologies. He added, "I only own a mattress." Later: "Simplicity in life allows you to focus on what's important." [quote from Venture Beat, March 2007] When Zuckerberg says "focus on what's important", he means focus on "the mission", focus on Facebook. The Organization Man was expected to have a family and a supportive wife - Facebook in Losse's book had dispensed with this. Facebook provided a living allowance so that staff could live near Facebook, all the better to dedicate their waking hours to the Company. The claim that Silicon Valley is a "meritocracy" where anyone can succeed based on their skills and intelligence is being exposed for its hollowness. Ms. Losse describes in detail what she sees as the gender discrimination of the "Boys" who run Facebook. Facebook doesn't value work outside of engineering and jobs occupied by women at Facebook, like Product Management and customer support are seen as lesser work. The exception

to Facebook's engineering stratification seems to be Sheryl Sandberg, who appears to be so brilliant that she's in her own category. Kate Losse's Facebook is hardly alone in populating engineering with young men. As an exercise, look at the web pages of any number of start-up companies. Many of them have team pictures. Most of these team pictures look so similar that it is difficult to tell them apart. You will see few women and even fewer people over 40 years of age. Age and gender discrimination are sometimes justified on the basis of "cultural fit". Ms. Losse describes the Facebook engineers as "Boys" who are still riding around on stake boards and going out after work drinking. Most people grow up and leave these things behind. As they mature, their engineering and system design skills mature as well. But this is lost on Ms. Losse's Facebook and most Silicon Valley companies where experience is discounted. Kate Losse is a good writer and the book is an easy and enjoyable read. Her book is not only an account of The Boy Kings, but also of her journey with Facebook from a small company to a globe spanning social network. She is good at describing some of her inner self. She seems to have a taste for rocker boys. But at Facebook the rocker boys are software engineers. She has a long friendship with an engineer she calls Thrax. In most of her relationships she substitutes the curated intimacy of Facebook for real world intimacy. It is not until the end of the book that she finally has sex with Thrax, although they have danced round it for years. There are a few strange omissions. Losse starts out as an hourly employee. At some point she must have become more of an official employee with stock options, but it's never clear when this happens. At another point she mentions to Zuckerberg that Facebook should get a house with a pool. He agrees and they rent a house which the engineers and support staff hang out in. Losse apparently moves into one of the rooms, but she never comments on this arrangement. For example, was she expected to clean up after the engineers who, no doubt, left pizza boxes and beer bottles scattered around? What was it like living in Facebook's early hangout house? I never got the feeling from reading the book that Losse burns with any particular passion. The closest she comes is her love of travel. But transience is an interlude, not a life. Hopefully Facebook, with its various pathologies, will not be the defining event of her life.

It's a story about Kate and not about Facebook as such. You do get some insight into Facebook culture from a customer service rep's eye and she was an early employee. She did reveal some troubling details like Facebook didn't have one way hash to encrypt passwords in the early days. So your passwords were exposed to all Facebook employees. They had a global password so they could login to any profile as that person. She did write about a conversation where she heard Mark and his friends talk about a woman can be either pretty or smart. But it's a common joke among

computer science grads so I don't know how much one should read into it especially when these guys were really young.

A really fun and fascinating read about one woman's perspective of working at Facebook in its early days. Ms Losse really got me thinking about social media and all of its implications, with some great insight into the creative minds behind Facebook.

The Boy Kings explores all the baggage of Facebook we know exists but haven't been able to articulate for ourselves. It understands the subcultures and it exposes the biases of the world that Facebook has built. Highly recommended.

This book leaves you with the feeling to never work in Silicon Valley. It shows how inequality plays in Silicon Valley which I like but sometimes throughout the book some events drag or repeat.

Channeling Joan Dideon, the author pens a coolly observant chronicle of her adventures at Facebook in 2005 to 2010. She is an excellent writer---I couldn't put it down.

Interesting look into one of the most game changing startups in the past decade. A rare look into the fraternity culture around this company, and how that looked to an early female insider.

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